

The Primal Hunter

Chapter 1051: A Final Gift & Taking Status

Both were silent for a few seconds before the First Sage looked back down at Jake. “Now, we *will* have to address this Record Fragment before you return to your time. I cannot be brought along while in this form where I possess consciousness... so allow me to give you a final gift.”

The First Sage leaned back in the chair as he continued. “The first thing you gained today were Records from the Malefic Viper. The second thing you gained were the Records simply waiting to be unlocked within yourself. So allow for this final part to be a gift of Records from me. Assuming you wish to accept them, of course.”

Jake enthusiastically nodded, definitely not going to say no to something given directly by the First Sage... though he kind of hoped getting said gift wouldn't require another training lesson where he died nearly a thousand times.

“Then allow me to leave you with something for your future. Today, you unlocked the potential of your soul, so I shall give you something to further explore and expand what you can do with it... including a method to address that little soul injury of yours.”

Jake perked up when he heard that, only growing more eager to see what the First Sage was about to leave him. Fixing Palete was naturally something Jake very much wanted to do, and if the First Sage had a method of doing that, Jake definitely wasn't going to reject it.

“I'm glad you seem keen... then let this be our goodbye. It was a pleasant, though surprising, encounter,” the First Sage smiled. His body slowly began to glow as Jake felt his Records surge, a torrent of power erupting from the old man's body that just made Jake even more sure he really didn't want to make the old man an enemy no matter how many eras he had been dead.

“Also... when you see Vilas, will you tell him something for me?” the First Sage spoke as his body was filled with power and broke down as his skin cracked.

Jake nodded, prompting the old man to continue.

“Please tell him that I'm proud of him. Proud of what he's become. And thank you, Jake, for being his friend. Having something like that for someone like him is more valuable than you can even begin to imagine.”

With those words, the body of the First Sage split apart. His skin peeled entirely off and turned into pages of paper, the rest of his body quickly following suit as hundreds of glowing pages flew into the air and began swirling before quickly beginning to regather on the table as the voice of the First Sage echoed with a final message.

“I shall leave you with Records of my Legacy... but perhaps do consider keeping what you learn from it to yourself, as the system tends to dislike spreading Forbidden Knowledge. I wish you fortune on your Path, Jake Thayne, and I look forward to seeing what you will become.”

In a final flash of energy and light, the First Sage's Record Fragment turned back into the form of a book. There was no grand explosion or shockwave when it was complete, but that didn't mean the book felt any weaker. In fact, it felt pretty damn intimidating to even try opening.

Jake looked at the book but didn't immediately reach for it as he bowed toward it instead. “Thanks for everything.”

He knew he wouldn't have time to delve into what the First Sage had left him as the vision was rapidly coming to an end. The world created by the First Sage's Records had already been broken when the First Sage turned himself into the Record Fragment in Jake's Soulspace, and the only reason why this encounter in the Soulspace had even lasted as long as it did was due to the interference of the First Sage. Which is to say he had not only battled Jake while teaching him, but also stabilized Jake's Path of the Heretic-Chosen vision, allowing it to last until Jake was done learning.

He really is... was... an absolute monster.

Considering that the vision was coming to an end imminently, Jake exited his Soulspace, knowing that the book would remain as it was. It didn't even have any lingering intent or anything like that from the First Sage, and Jake knew intuitively that it was made of Records where its Origin had died a long, long time ago.

Jake barely had time to open his eyes as his vision was momentarily filled with white, the world of the vision entirely void of anything as the First Sage was no more. In the very next moment, Jake found himself back in his laboratory in Haven, not even a full second having passed in Realtime since he used Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

That being the case, this had no doubt been the most efficient second Jake had ever spent in his life so far. Looking back, he had really been dumb those moments during the vision where Jake had been afraid he wouldn't really get much out of it because oh boy, had he been wrong. So, so wrong.

The first thing he had gained was the massive upgrade to Sagacity of the Malefic Viper. It wasn't just an upgrade from legendary to mythical, but it had even skipped that middle

step of top-tier legendary most of his other Legacy of the Malefic Viper skills were sitting at.

Something he hadn't even considered – probably because he had skipped over the notifications to focus on the First Sage quicker after knocking himself out – was the experience gained from getting that upgrade. This only hammered home further how good of an investment those uses of Path of the Heretic-Chosen had been, as he'd even gotten quite a few levels under his belt.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 301 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 309 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 302 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 305 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

To be more exact, Jake had gained 9 levels in his profession from that one skill upgrade. It was likely so extreme because Jake had taken it straight to mythical, but he also had a feeling the First Sage had something to do with it. Experience gained and Records were closely related, and the mere fact the upgrade had happened with the help of the First Sage had to play a role. At least Jake felt like it should count for something.

Closing down the system messages, Jake looked around the laboratory for a bit, feeling as if he'd been gone for such a long time despite the vision not actually lasting that long compared to the random adventures Jake usually went on.

Sighing, Jake stood up and went back up to the lodge. He felt an odd mixture of being fully refreshed yet also mentally tired, as he needed a bit to himself to digest everything that had just gone down. He also had to get back into his Soulspace to check out the book, but he purposefully delayed that a little for him to be fully calm and back in the right mind.

Back up in the lodge, Jake went out the door and over to the small pond. He sat down at the edge of it cross-legged and looked at the water for a while, feeling a bit guilty about scaring off the small eels within. After several minutes, Jake decided to open his

status menu, only for him to instantly close it again and take out his void lollipop for a good lick before immediately opening the menu back up.

It's been a while since I properly went over everything, hasn't it? Jake asked himself as he checked out his full status for the first time since shortly after Nevermore. A lot of time had passed since then, with Jake experiencing quite a few things, which had naturally also led to its fair share of levels, skill upgrades, and new skills.

Seeing as he was checking out the status properly, Jake compared it to right after Nevermore to better see in which areas he had progressed the most. He did make one change, though, also focusing on how much his resource pools had grown.

Status

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Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – 278 --> 305]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – 289 --> 302]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – 267 --> 309]

Health Points (HP): 182,060/182,060 --> 295,950/295,950

Mana Points (MP): 401,321/411,484 --> 518,125/518,125

Stamina: 205,651/212,790 --> 294,987/294,987

Stats

Strength: 26170 --> 32997

Agility: 34616 --> 43130

Endurance: 21279 --> 23599

Vitality: 18206 --> 23676

Toughness: 14488 --> 20084

Wisdom: 26335 --> 33160

Intelligence: 22425 --> 26756

Perception: 53661 --> 57278

Willpower: 23267 --> 29986

Free points: 0 The source of this content is *novel**fire**net*

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer XV], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], **[Nobility: Duke]**, [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths], [Mythical Prodigy], [Perfect Evolution (C-grade)], [Nevermore Challenger All-star], [Peerless Conquerer of Nevermore]

Class Skills: [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Bestial Hunter's Tracking (Epic)], [Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Ancient)], [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Horizon-chasing Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)], [Mark of the Horizon-Chasing Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge (Ancient)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)], [Unseen Hunter Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], **[Lone Hunter of Horizon's Edge (Legendary)]**, **[Protean Arrow of Eternal Horizons (Legendary)]**, **[Timeless Focus of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)]**, [Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)], [Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Mythical)], **[Moment of (Mythical)]**

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Brew Potion (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Rare)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)], [Arcane Curse Manifestation (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], **[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]**, [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], **[Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]**, **[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]**, [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Core Manipulation of (Legendary)], **[Divine Bargain of the Malefic Viper (Mythical)]**, **[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Mythical)]**

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Identify (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], **[Anomalous Arcane Soul (Mythical)]**, [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

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Jake read through the long status – one that hadn't really grown in length that much since the last time, as he'd only gotten one entirely new skill. Then again, he'd only had two skill selections as he'd gotten just under thirty levels, with one of them granting him a skill that merged with another to form Divine Bargain of the Malefic Viper.

Looking at it, Jake had also gained more levels in his profession than his class by a fair margin, with his First Sage encounter only increasing the disparity in growth. Looking at just how many profession levels he had gotten over such a short amount of time, it was honestly absurd. Especially when one considers Jake had spent a significant amount of this period suffering from severe soul damage.

He'd gained 42 levels in what, a couple of years? It was bonkers under any kind of usual circumstances and really showed that whatever had gone down during this time truly was the opposite of usual circumstances.

He had been a good little Chosen and helped his Patron lure in and slay Yip of Yore, immediately followed that up by invading Ell'Hakan's planet and killing him, to now having this meeting with the First Sage. Calling this period eventful would be an understatement.

These many levels had naturally resulted in quite a few stats gained across the board, especially in the stats where he'd upgraded a Malefic Viper Legacy skill. Besides that, the stats his profession gave to had naturally grown the most, though Perception and a few other physical stats had followed along well.

Regarding Free Points, Jake still put them all into Agility and Strength with an even split between the two. Seeing as Jake was very much a hybrid kind of fighter who used both magic and his physical abilities, he was afraid of his Agility and Strength falling behind others, and so far, he hadn't been disappointed with this choice of Free Point investment... though it did hurt a bit not to see his Perception increase by as much as it could.

At least he still had the void lollipop of infinite Perception to get at least a few bonus stats to Perception, constantly keeping his elixir quota filled. He did begin to consider if maybe it was time to go full Perception again soon, though...

Moving on. Looking at his three resource pools, Jake was happy by how much the three of them had all grown, especially his health points and stamina that'd gotten that sweet 25% bonus from Anomalous Arcane Soul.

Having larger resource pools didn't mean Jake was automatically stronger, but it did increase his longevity in battle significantly. Jake also felt that with his recent upgrade to his soul, he would be able to handle using his boosting skill even more, so having more resources to burn through was definitely a boon.

His health points increasing so much also made Jake consider certain possibilities... ones he had considered for a while when thinking about which direction he wanted to take his Blood of the Malefic Viper upgrade, as that and Fangs of the Malefic Viper still needed to get upgraded as the last two Malefic Viper Legacy skills.

Speaking of skill upgrades...

Jake made sure to highlight all the skills that had changed since last he checked, and while not overly many skills had upgraded or improved, all of the improvements had been pretty huge. Jake had upgraded three more skills to mythical rarity, with the rest all getting upgraded to legendary – a feat made a bit less impressive by the fact the Malefic Viper Legacy skills had unchanged rarities. In total, he'd gained four mythical skills with Divine Bargain being formed, the rarity really beginning to feel a lot more "normal" to Jake now.

In his class, he had also gained some great upgrades, and looking at them, they were all related to Jake's fight with Ell'Hakan, either from happening during the fight or because Jake upgraded the skill to prepare for the fight. Well, alright, Lone Hunter had come from a skill selection, but Jake didn't count that as an upgrade, and he had used it during his fight with Ell'Hakan, so it still counted.

Finally, for the very first time, Jake had added a skill to his race skills section. Every other skill there had been granted in some way or another, but this time around, Jake had been the one who'd made it so that it was part of his race.

He did have some questions about what it meant for the skill to be a race skill now rather than a profession one, and he would be sure to ask Villy about that later as they would definitely have an in-depth talk very soon... but before that, Jake naturally had to go look at one last thing.

It would be impolite to show up to a meeting with Villy without even knowing what the final gift he'd been given by the First Sage was all about, right? Sure, the First Sage had said Jake should reconsider if he wanted to share anything he learned, but Jake still had to know if it was something he wanted to discuss despite the old man's words.

Closing down his status menu, happy with his recent growth, Jake shut his eyes as he reentered his Soulspace once more.

Manifesting his body within, Jake couldn't help but smile as everything came into view. The seemingly infinite forest stretched further than he could see, and Jake knew that should he travel in any direction, the world would simply expand to accommodate him. He walked a Path where he pursued an endlessly expanding horizon, so how could he possibly reach the end of his own Soulspace?

Compared to before, Jake felt way more at home within his own Soulspace, and from the looks of it, the Eternal Shadow was also chilling, having found its own nice little hiding spot.

Turning his attention to the reason why he'd entered the Soulspace, Jake appeared in front of the table with the book still on it. With a thought, Jake chose to construct a wooden building around the book to house it, making it into a small library of sorts.

When he was satisfied, Jake sat down in front of the book and really studied it. The cover was off-white with a tinge of yellow that old white objects tended to get. There was still no title on the cover, but Jake felt like this had more to do with Jake not knowing what the title should be than anything else.

With a careful approach, Jake reached out and slowly opened the book. The moment he did, a faint light was emitted and entered his body as a bit of knowledge from the bibliography of the tome was given for free as an introduction it seemed.

Immediately, he knew that fully studying this book wouldn't be a quick endeavor, and he was far from qualified to understand all of it in his current state. Despite it only looking to be a few hundred pages, the book contained far more than that, with it being filled with actual writing mixed with energy patterns for Jake to analyze and unlock, seals he could unseal by understanding prior sections serving as small tests, and many more things Jake had yet to uncover.

Unable to stop himself, Jake turned to the first page, where he was instantly met with his first "test."

However, it proved to only require Jake to infuse a bit of his energy, proving his soul was powerful enough to unlock the first chapter. As the words appeared on the page, Jake began reading, and he'd barely gotten a single paragraph down before his eyes opened wide as he realized what the book was truly about.

It was all about how to use and upgrade one of the Legacy skills created by the First Sage... and if he understood what he read correctly, this was a massive fucking bombshell of knowledge...

Because, unknowingly, Jake already had one of the First Sage's Legacy skills.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 1052: Bombshells

According to many scholars in Paths, Legacy skills likely made up the majority of all skills in the entire multiverse. From huge divine factions having an untold number who walked Paths entirely made up of Legacy skills to a master with a single disciple to pass down aspects of his Path. It wasn't odd for someone from the Holy Church or an assassin trained by the Court of Shadows to have more than ninety percent of all their skills be Legacy skills.

The skills were rarely – if ever – only from a single individual, though. As a way to combat the negative aspects of someone only inheriting the Path of a single other individual, Legacies from entire Pantheons were instead given, allowing those capable to pick and choose from all the different Legacies, ultimately forging their own Path.

A good example of this could even be seen with the Order of the Malefic Viper. Nearly every alchemist had Palate of the Malefic Viper, with many also wanting at least a few more due to the synergistic effects of the Malefic Viper Legacy skills, but they rarely ever had more than a few. Instead, they had teachers and masters who helped them get other skills, which they mixed with the ones from the Primordial as well as the skills they had formed themselves – a practice the Order actively promoted.

Jake was a bit of an odd example for this as the majority of his Profession skills were related to the Malefic Viper, but that was because he was in a situation where his Patron and the guy who usually gave him advice and taught him was the same person. Not that it had particular negatives as Jake wasn't merely walking the same Path of the Malefic Viper, was simply using his Patron's Path to support his own.

Either way, the point was that there was no need to avoid Legacy skills as long as the Paths you learned from didn't end up entirely overshadowing yours.

Besides, even if one wanted to, they were impossible to avoid...

Especially if the Legacy skill in question was one you had no idea was even a Legacy skill in the first place. Even more so when it was a skill where it made no sense at all that it was a Legacy skill in the first place. At least not from Jake's point of view.

Back in his Soulspace, he had to take an extra few moments to read that first portion of the book properly to ensure he hadn't misunderstood the bombshell of knowledge that he was pretty confident would send shockwaves through the multiverse if ever spread.

After double, triple, and quattuordecuple-checking that he hadn't misunderstood anything, all Jake could do was lean back and mutter to himself.

"Bloody hell..."

Now, If Jake had learned that a skill such as One Step Mile was the Legacy skill of the First Sage, he would have totally believed it. If he was told that one of his alchemy skills, even one of the more basic ones, was actually a Legacy skill, Jake could also readily

accept that. Shit, even a skill like Legacy of Man could make some sense as it was about passing down Records and knowledge. Then again, in some ways, one could say Legacy of Man was already one as the First Sage had been human. It was still possible that the original Origin had been the First Sage, though...

However, nothing could have prepared him for the skill it actually was. A skill so innocuous that Jake had never even considered it could be a Legacy skill for even a moment. A skill Jake had with him nearly from the very beginning:

Meditate.

It was a skill Jake had automatically gained upon evolving to E-grade... and a skill that the vast, vast majority of people in E-grade or above possessed throughout the multiverse. From enlightened to monsters, Meditate was known as a basic skill that anyone had. All it really required was for one to be sapient, and you would get it.

And now Jake was staring at a book saying that this was a Legacy skill of the First Sage.

No, not that a variant of Meditate was his Legacy skill. The very concept behind Meditate was bound to the Records and Legacy of the First Sage. Any variants across the multiverse were merely outcrops of what the old man had created, branching off or attempting to build upon what the First Sage had made. All of this while Jake suspected no one had the slightest clue it was a Legacy skill in the first place, much less that its Origin was some old human who died while in C-grade.

Jake also finally understood why the First Sage said Jake should consider keeping this to himself, even from Villy. The old man had also said directly that it was Forbidden Knowledge, meaning that it wasn't even as if Jake could talk about it with anyone else. However, this only left Jake questioning things more.

Why was it Forbidden Knowledge in the first place? And if it was... why did the system allow the First Sage to tell Jake at all? Villy knowing Forbidden Knowledge made perfect sense as his Bloodline allowed him to remember, but Jake wasn't like that. All his Bloodline could do was Jake vaguely feel that he had maybe forgotten something, but that's about it. Yet with the First Sage, it seemed to not bother hiding anything.

Did he do something, maybe? Jake wondered. It didn't feel like the First Sage had done some weird stuff to allow Jake to know, but needless to say, there was no realistic way to find out. It was also possible that the First Sage was simply aware of the secrets he was allowed to tell Jake, thus having avoided any forbidden topics during their conversation. He did mention a few times that he couldn't share some things, so that interpretation made a lot of sense, even if it didn't explain why Jake was allowed to learn what he learned.

It could also be because of the way I'm learning it, Jake also wondered. An explanation that made more sense. Path of the Heretic-Chosen was effectively the system deciding what Jake was allowed to see, and it had allowed him to see the First Sage. Even if the old man had used nineteen Transcendent skills or something dumb like that to set up their meeting, it was ultimately the system that allowed it all to take place.

The more he thought about it, the more certain Jake felt that the reason he was allowed to learn all this was due to the method he used to first hear of the First Sage. His Path in relation to Villy was that of a Heretic-Chosen, someone who viewed himself as an equal to his Patron, and what was more equal than sharing huge secrets? It felt like a flimsy explanation, but clearly, the entire route to Jake eventually meeting the First Sage had started from the Malefic Viper, and the system had even pre-ordained their meeting the day Jake received his boots from the Tutorial Challenge Dungeon.

Shaking his head, Jake turned his attention back toward the tome in front of him. While this meeting with the First Sage had given Jake some answers, it had left him with far more questions. All for later, as for now, he wanted to at least get a rudimentary understanding of how exactly Meditate could be a Legacy skill.

All the basic common rarity version of Meditate did was increase resource regeneration while cutting off all senses from the outside world. Jake had initially compared it to sleeping but later learned it was capable of a lot more – oh, and not as good as sleeping, at least not for Jake. He used the skill all the time to concentrate, courtesy of his Serene Soul Meditation skill that helped calm his mind while in meditation.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Jake theorized that the basic version of Meditate was indeed just one aspect of the Legacy skill boiled down to its basics. One concept focused to its extreme. A concept that was already pretty damn powerful in the first place.

Reading a bit more in the book, the first chapter did touch on how Meditate worked. Jake had assumed it worked due to system-fuckery, and after having read the explanation, all he could do was nod and agree with himself that whatever the fuck the First Sage had done was pretty much the same shit as system-fuckery. At least if Jake wanted to comprehend the actual underlying concepts and not just get a surface-level understanding.

Anyhow, according to the book, Meditate essentially just stimulated the connection between the concepts that allowed resource pools to passively regenerate – fundamental law controlled and directed by the system - and the resource pools in question, resulting in increased regeneration. The “cost” for this was that the layer of the soul allowing external perception had to be entirely focused on enabling this effect to take place.

However, the First Sage made clear that despite it seeming like a cost, it was, in fact, just a secondary beneficial effect in his book as it allowed one to focus more on the inner world, be that through the movement of energies within the body – the Soulshape – or even the Soulspace for those capable of connecting to that.

Jake read these explanations in the book put on plain text, as he couldn't help but also question the format of information delivery. Many of the books Jake usually read were mostly glorified audiobooks for any sections of heavy writing, though there were also many instances of it being written normally. Even In those cases, the text tended to be super fucking small, or the pages seemingly expanded when one looked at them, but the book left by the First Sage wasn't like that. Google search *novel* *fire* *net*

Instead, it was like the writing in the average book Jake could have found back before the system. Well, besides this one being handwritten, even if the writing was so perfect it could have been a machine with the font also consistent throughout. Jake wondered if this choice of format was due to the First Sage's past as a normal pre-system human. As a librarian, he would have no doubt read plenty of books, if not perhaps written a few throughout his many years working the job.

Not to say the book was normal in other ways. Just the pages with normal writing on them. There was still plenty of magical bullshit going on with it, especially when one considered that the book was effectively just a representation of Records.

Continuing to read a bit further, Jake was in the zone, trying to really take everything in and internalize whatever he learned. Admittedly, none of it was very useful quite yet if Jake wanted to upgrade his Meditate skill, but Jake wasn't worried in the slightest as he knew all this was simply laying the foundation for when he would eventually begin to delve deeper into the skill and the ways it could be upgraded.

He also began to understand why the First Sage had left this book to him. Meditate was a skill all about connecting with your inner self and, in concert, one's soul. It was a skill about regeneration and healing. One of reflection and growth. A truly multi-faceted skill that gave one the ability to understand oneself better, and through that understanding, power could be uncovered.

That's when Jake remembered something else. He remembered one of his talks with Villy about the Dao Sect and how they apparently had a Meditate skill part of their Legacy that allowed one to gain experience simply by meditating. He also remembered the Sword Saint, who had a meditation skill that allowed him to gain experience when he was doing an odd sword dance... once more just making him realize he had much more to understand about Meditate.

Jake continued reading a little more until he had to stop. He wasn't in the right mindset to be reading the book right now, as whenever he learned something new, he couldn't help but be taken aback at just how far the First Sage's influence had truly spread.

The First Sage was overpowered as fuck. Of that, there was no doubt. He also knew that the old man had left a lot of Records with Villy, who later became a Primordial, his Legacy forever part of the Malefic Viper's. However, he couldn't even begin to comprehend the sheer scope of things with these new revelations.

It really was everyone who had Meditate. The system gave it out as a basic skill upon evolution. Didn't that mean nearly everyone unknowingly carried Records related to the First Sage? That everyone had part of his Legacy? Just how many Records was that? How the hell had he managed to create a skill the system later decided to make this universal?

Closing the book, Jake shook his head. It all felt like too much, and he felt pretty damn confident there were way more shocking revelations just waiting for him. On the one hand, he felt that he could really have done without all this knowledge, but on the other hand, he was incredibly grateful for the First Sage to have left this book to him. To have left a fragment of his own Records... even if the old man probably did have some motive behind it that Jake just wasn't smart enough to understand. Then again, he didn't feel confident anyone would be smart enough to outmaneuver that absolute monster.

With the book out of the way, Jake was faced with his next challenge... talking to Villy. He considering doing something else first, but he really shouldn't delay his discussion with the Primordial more than necessary.

He still had to decide what he wanted to talk about and what he didn't want to talk about. The biggest topic Jake was split on was obviously the book and the bombshell regarding the Meditate skill, but there were also many other smaller things Jake was doubtful about.

Jake ended up taking a few minutes within his Soulspace to reflect before he decided to just go with the flow on things. He didn't like keeping secrets from Villy unless he had a good reason to, so Jake also chose to mention the things about Meditate.

Opening his eyes in the real world, Jake gave the eels in the pond a smile and a nod as he stood up and went back into the lodge and down to the lab. Down there, he got things ready before he reached out to the Primordial, and from how quick the answer came, it was pretty obvious the god had been waiting.

The connection was formed, and Villy was the first to speak.

"You met him, huh?"

"Yeah," Jake spoke out loud with a nod, having already set down a sound isolation barrier, and the small ritual he had made allowed the Viper to hear him speak. He had done it like this partly to know if the system would somehow stop him from physically talking if he wanted to say certain things. He didn't know if that was a thing, but it was interesting to test.

“That does explain the upgrade to Sagacity. I noticed it immediately when I felt a drain from the drop of blood within you as if the Records were being rapidly extracted, and I don’t know anyone but him who would be capable of triggering something like that. Well, outside of you doing it yourself,” the Malefic Viper spoke.

Jake was silent for a moment, really feeling unsure of how he wanted to approach this entire conversation. “He is definitely the most overpowered individual I’ve ever come across. But... you don’t question that he was even able to directly help me during the vision?”

It wasn’t as if how the visions during Path of the Heretic-Chosen worked was a secret, and the way this vision had gone was entirely different from anything before.

“No, no, not really. I’ve long stopped being surprised about what the First Sage was capable of,” the snake god said with a nostalgic tone.

Jake had originally wanted to save the entire Meditate topic for later, but he felt that the setup was too good, so he decided to just drive right into it.

“Hey... listen, the upgrade to Sagacity wasn’t all this vision gave me,” Jake began.

“I figured as much. Even from here, I feel the lingering Records of the First Sage upon you. He left you with something, didn’t he?”

Jake nodded. *“Yeah, a book within my Soulspace. He left a fragment of Records behind as a final act before the vision ended, and it’s this Record Fragment I want to talk about. More specifically, what it’s all about...”*

Without further ado, Jake explained what he’d just learned mere minutes earlier. He didn’t get very long before he dropped the bombshell regarding the Meditate skill. After he did, he allowed the Primordial time to speak.

Villy was silent for a few moments, long enough for Jake to question if the god had even heard him or if Jake had somehow gotten censored. However, just before Jake spoke up again. The Viper started laughing. Jake was taken aback as he’d never heard Villy laugh like that before. It was loud and unrestrained, and it took the god a bit before he finally calmed down.

Only to drop a knowledge bombshell of his own.

“So... so it wasn’t just Identify.”

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Chapter 1053: Recap Time With Villy

It was already well-established that the First Sage was overpowered as fuck, yet his level of overpoweredness seemed to have no end.

Jake was silent for several seconds after Villy's revelation until he also couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of everything. It was truly to the level of just being silly. It also helped Jake even further understand why Villy had never really viewed the First Sage as a "person," and honestly, Jake had also begun to change his view.

He was more akin to a bug in the system. A natural force that had moved the entire multiverse in a certain direction. He had exploited early and often, taken advantage wherever he could, learning everything there was to learn along the way. At the same time, the system had apparently also been learning from him, creating what would eventually be the two most basic damn skills of the multiverse.

"He really is something," Jake said, shaking his head as he stopped laughing. "Or was something. Honestly, I'm not sure how to classify him, and it feels weird talking about the First Sage as if he's some ancient figure from history, considering I just spoke to him."

"His existence being confusing is only to be expected, as even now I at times find myself perplexed when I recall things he could do," the Viper joked. "I am also pleasantly surprised that you can even learn that he is the Origin of the Identify skill now. You couldn't before."

"I couldn't?" Jake asked, confused.

"I tried to tell you once, but as it's considered Forbidden Knowledge, it was censored. However, now it seems that has changed... perhaps not just for you... just give me a second real quick..."

Villy was silent for a few seconds before he reconnected.

"Nope, still Forbidden Knowledge. Details pertaining to Meditate, too," the Viper said, Jake not even wanting to know how he'd just tested if it was still Forbidden Knowledge. Okay, he totally knew the Viper had just teleported some random innocent person to him, shared the Forbidden Knowledge, and confirmed the person couldn't know. As for what he'd done to that person afterward... yeah not something he should think about.

"You know, you seem awfully accepting of the bombshell I just dropped. At least after your initial reaction," Jake couldn't help but point out.

"I could say the same about you. You also don't appear very surprised upon learning that the First Sage is also the original creator of the Identify skill," the snake god accurately pointed out.

"Well... it seems very on-brand for him," Jake muttered, also realizing why the Viper wasn't that taken aback when he reflected on his own lack of surprise. They had both been personally exposed to the ridiculousness of the First Sage, so why would they be overly surprised knowing the man had done something ludicrous? His entire existence was ludicrous in the first place, so whenever Jake heard he had done something else insane, his initial reaction was just: "Yeah, that tracks."

A feeling perhaps only the two of them in the entire multiverse could share as only they could bond over just how overpowered the First Sage had been.

"I can also feel that this knowledge about Meditate and the Sagacity upgrade weren't the only things you gained from Master. Through this connection alone, I can feel something has changed with you. You feel more... whole. Did you get an upgrade to your Anomalous Soul skill, allowing it to mutate further?" Villy asked, moving the conversation forward.

"It did indeed upgrade," Jake readily confirmed as he scratched the back of his head. "The Record Fragment I absorbed manifested into an image of the First Sage within my Soulspace and proceeded to beat the living shit out of me until I learned how to not get beaten up anymore."

"One must admire Master's ability to change his teaching style according to the one he's teaching," Villy chuckled. *"I do wonder... why did he even agree to help you? Can you tell me more about what happened during this vision?"*

Jake nodded as he began to narrate everything that had gone down right from the moment he appeared in the town the First Sage hailed from. From the beginning, Jake's narration got incredibly slow as Villy asked incredibly in-depth questions about things Jake would usually consider unimportant, such as the layout of the First Sage's house and over-descriptions of everything in the entire city Jake had seen.

After some time, Jake understood why the Viper wanted to know so badly... because he'd never actually seen where the First Sage lived before the system. He'd never seen the library the First Sage held so dear or known many of the things the First Sage had told Jake during the walk down memory lane they had. Villy had known some things here and there, also aware of many things Jake wasn't, but never had he gotten such a comprehensive history of the First Sage.

The more time passed, the more assured Jake became that the First Sage hadn't just shared what he did to engrain his Records in Jake's memory but because he knew all of it would eventually funnel back to the Malefic Viper. Perhaps he wanted the Primordial to remember, considering he couldn't forget anything, or maybe he was just doing his

disciple a favor. Either or, Jake gladly shared everything, leaving very few details out as he went over his entire encounter with the First Sage. This chapter is updated by
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Jake also made sure to share the advice the First Sage had regarding getting over the feeling of loss. How one should instead focus on having a goal while finding comfort in that as long as one was alive, the memories – and thus Records - of those one held dear would also live on. It was basic sappy advice that Jake felt didn't really resonate much with the Viper, as he definitely already had his own ways of coping or already knew. Still, Jake wanted to share it, and he also shared some of his own thoughts.

"I am ninety-nine percent sure the reason he wanted to die wasn't actually because of how he struggled with his memories," Jake said. "Sure, it may have played a minor role, but the true explanation is definitely part of something bigger. Some grand plan of his. He kept talking about how it just had to be that way. What I'm trying to say is that you really have no reason to feel guilty about killing him in the first place."

"I already halfway knew that there was far more to it, but thank you for confirming," Villy said after a bit. "Guilt is a weird thing, though. I know he wanted me to kill him; I know it was part of his plan, yet I still feel guilty for having done so. Maybe I just believe like I should feel guilty, and the explanation he wanted to die out of sadness just fit better with that narrative."

"Yeah, that's kind of dumb," Jake shrugged, trying to lighten the mood with his jovial attitude. "Clearly, he didn't die because he was sad, and let's be honest, if the old man hadn't wanted to let you kill him for some grand design of his, he would have turned you into string cheese before you even managed to touch him. I have a very hard time seeing anything kill him unless he wanted them to."

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"True, I guess," the Malefic Viper said before urging Jake to continue talking about the vision.

All estimates Jake could have had about how long this talk would take were entirely overshoot as the two of them spoke for hours upon hours, mainly because Jake had to go into so many details. It was as if the Viper wanted to form very vivid images from Jake's descriptions so he had an as accurate understanding of what happened as possible.

Jake had totally expected Villy to be utterly shocked when Jake shared the First Sage slaying the Void Dweller, but he seemed to think that was entirely normal and just urged Jake to continue as explanations of how the emptiness of space looked naturally weren't that interesting.

Soon enough, they reached past the point where Jake had Sagacity had upgraded, and the vision would soon be coming to an end. Villy was a bit surprised when Jake said that the First Sage had effectively killed himself to create the Record Fragment book but didn't question it further as Jake continued and moved on to what had happened inside his Soulspace.

Surprisingly enough, the Viper didn't seem very interested in what had gone down within Jake's Soulspace at all. To Jake, it had been pretty damn impactful, but Villy didn't care much beyond knowing the result. The god also clarified he knew Jake's soul had a chance to mutate in the direction it had, but as always wanted Jake to find out himself.

As for Villy never having told Jake to train and get better acquainted with his Soulspace... well, according to the snake god, he had never seen the need to. In his words:

"To me, it wasn't a question of you hunkering down and working tirelessly on your Soulspace to better understand yourself and find balance, but merely one of time. I don't even believe it left you vulnerable to images of Records, as should you ever be truly at risk, the Records of your Bloodline would do all it could to survive. Now, the First Sage is a complete outlier who has all the right qualities to push you toward this upgrade. Something I wouldn't be able to do even if I wanted to," Villy simply said.

"Would you recommend that I keep practicing and trying to improve the Soulspace further?" Jake questioned.

"I would recommend studying the Record Fragment about the Meditate skill left by the First Sage and try to learn from that before doing anything else with your Soulspace," the snake god answered. *"In fact, I would put it quite far up on your priority list to learn from the First Sage, though I doubt you can learn even a fraction while still in C-grade. I truly believe that in the vast multiverse, there is no better teacher."*

"Not gonna disagree with that one," Jake nodded, having firsthand experience getting two mythical rarity skills and a book for future study from just one brief encounter.

Soon enough, Jake reached the end of his narration of his vision adventures, right up until the moment the First Sage turned back into the Record Fragment book... at which point the old man had said some words Jake felt a bit awkward passing on, but knew he had to.

"This feels a bit weird, but the First Sage did ask me to pass on a message to you right before he disappeared," Jake said, taking a deep breath. "He wanted me to tell you that he's proud of you and proud of what you've become."

It was a brief message that, to some, perhaps even seemed hollow. Yet it carried a lot of meaning, and after Jake said this, the Viper took a moment to himself. Jake remained

quiet throughout, giving the snake god all the time he needed before Villy eventually spoke.

"Thanks for passing it on."

The two of them were quiet once more for a while, Jake trying to remember if he'd forgotten anything important. He had purposefully excluded some tidbits of information here and there and hadn't shared stuff like the First Sage saying it was good that Villy had a friend and all that, as saying something in that vein would just be too damn awkward.

Villy also clearly wanted a bit of time to digest everything, but soon enough, he restarted the conversation.

"I will say, the First Sage you met does strike me as slightly different to the one I knew and remember. Not in that he's a different person, but he clearly knows a lot more than even when he died. At least it strikes me that way," the Malefic Viper said. *"Which is quite peculiar. I saw no signs of him having knowledge of the future when I knew him, but during that vision of yours, he clearly knew things that would be impossible to know during the first Era."*

"It has something to do with his Bloodline, right?" Jake asked without much thought.

"That would make the most sense. The question is how it works. One theory I had was that he could read the Records of our time through you and the system because his Records are so omnipresent throughout the universe through Identify and now apparently also Meditate, but some things seem off with that theory. Such as why he didn't seem to have any knowledge about you, nor did he mention any of your creations you've made using your Origin manipulation," Villy theorized out loud.

"Yeah, I did notice that," Jake nodded. He also hadn't purposefully brought any of them up or even mentioned his Primeval Origins abilities during his meeting with the First Sage.

"I guess it doesn't truly matter how he knows about the future, just that he does... though it does give me some fundamental questions about how the multiverse, the Bloodline, and time works. One thing I do feel fairly confident about is that you caused him to know. You manifested his existence through your Path of the Heretic-Chosen, setting everything into motion," the Viper continued.

Jake slowly nodded along, having already had thoughts that was the case, though he did bring up that it wasn't entirely him. "I would say this seems like part of some bigger plot, though. I got the boots that the First Sage used to reach out and set up this meeting as a reward from the system, and I seriously doubt that's just some big coincidence."

“True,” the snake god agreed. “It’s all kind of exciting, isn’t it? All very mysterious. I must say, I doubt many – if any – other gods can brag about their C-grade Chosen somehow unveiling fundamental truths of the multiverse and creating genuine intrigue for their gods.”

“What can I say? I’m just built different,” Jake grinned. “And now better than ever after my soul upgrade.”

“Indeed,” the god chuckled before turning a bit more serious. “Now, while I feel fairly confident all knowledge related to the First Sage is considered Forbidden Knowledge, I would still be careful and avoid speaking about him and your recent encounter. Not even what you’ve learned. Especially be careful around that follower of Oras.”

“Arnold?” Jake asked, confused. “Why?”

“The only two people I know for sure have knowledge of the First Sage and his secrets are us. However, I cannot rule out that the Void Gods may also be aware of his existence. While I doubt the C-grade human will be allowed to know Forbidden Knowledge, I know that one of the primary reasons Oras even blesses people in the first place is to better connect to and perceive the material plane, making it not a stretch to assume he will be able to hear and see through those blessed,” Villy explained, giving Jake some food for thought.

And with good timing, too, as Jake’s immediate plan after talking with Villy was actually to stop by Arnold and discuss his bow, which was in a pretty bad state after his fight with Ell’Hakan.

“Any other warnings I should keep in mind?” Jake asked.

“Not really, no. Just keep trucking along and do remember to study the Records left by Master, especially the knowledge regarding healing your soul and thus Palete. While I’m looking into methods to fix it, no solution I can offer is better than one found through your own effort. Oh, and of course, don’t even think about evolving to B-grade before Palete is fully healed,” the Viper reiterated a warning the First Sage had also given.

“I know,” Jake sighed.

“Good. Now, I’ll let you get back to things, and I also have some ideas and thoughts I need to fully digest. When your system event is over, we can have a proper sit-down as we do have some more things to discuss, but I prefer to do so in person,” Villy said.

“Sure thing,” Jake nodded. “Any final advice before I set off? Perhaps ones pertaining to me soon invading the Holy Church’s territory?”

“Refining the bodies of Holy Church members into alchemical ingredients tends to create horrible materials as the holy affinity doesn’t mix well with the Order’s alchemy methods.”

“Very useful, thank you,” Jake said in a deadpan tone while shaking his head.

After a final goodbye and agreement to talk again later, Jake got up and prepared to go find Arnold to hear if he had some ideas regarding his semi-broken bow. As he was heading up toward the lodge, he also considered how everything was progressing in the Milky Way galaxy, as while the vision itself hadn’t taken much Realtime, the talk with Villy sure hadn’t been a short one.

I should also contact Carmen... Bertram did recommend having her as a potential backup when I invade the Holy Church’s territory.

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Chapter 1054: Bow Quest

“This place really is shabby compared to Bobby’s planet,” Carmen muttered as she walked through the small city with Sven, the City Leader of the place. She had just returned to Earth only about an hour ago, and in all honesty, she didn’t really wanna be there. At least she had one person she actually liked around, as on her other side walking with them was Pam, the City Leader of the town Carmen had claimed the Pylon of Civilization to create once upon a time.

“We are effectively just an outpost here on this planet, so we can’t lean too hard into the ways of Valhal unless we want to scare visitors off,” Sven said, shaking his head.

“See, I would argue the opposite. We would have way more visitors if it was more like over there,” Carmen insisted.

“Most people don’t like getting drop-kicked by other customers while out shopping,” Pam said, shaking her head.

“Why not? Seems like a fair way to decide who gets the last item,” Carmen shrugged with a toothy smile. “But I guess I get your point. Still, we should make it more like Valhal for them to really get the culture so people can see if it’ll be a fit for them. That way, we will at least avoid them feeling too out of water while visiting actual Valhal territory.”

“That is the plan, but it will take some time, and for now, we are still working on properly reestablishing a connection with other surrounding City Leaders,” Sven explained. “Our ploy of acting as if we are fully on the side of Yip of Yore lost us a lot of allies and had many show apprehension about even approaching us, and while they are all coming back now, these things take time, and we need to establish a lot of contracts... this time with far better terms for us.”

Carmen just nodded along, not really caring much as she looked at Pam. “Damn was it a good choice to make you the City Leader so you can deal with all that shit.”

“It’s not like I’m really dealing with it either,” Pam sighed. “There’s more competent people handling that. Who would have thought that thoughtlessly giving the City Leader position to the one person you knew wouldn’t necessarily get you a competent leader?”

“Hey, it worked out for Jake,” Carmen argued.

“Miranda wasn’t a boxing coach but someone with at least some level of managerial experience. Plus, she actually cares about being a leader while I just misappropriate funds to make the gym I actually spend my time running better,” Pam said shamelessly.

“Funnily enough, that seems more in line with the Valhal culture than Sven and his contracts,” Carmen semi-joked. She was totally on board with Pam’s actions as the gym had actually turned out quite nice based on the last time she visited.

Sven just shook his head and didn’t argue or comment as the three of them headed toward the main office where they would be having a meeting with a bunch of all the City Leaders Leaders who were affiliated with Valhal.

During all the scheming and all that bullshit, Valhal had indeed taken a hit to their presence on Earth, but they hadn’t actually lost control of any cities. They had pulled back and lost some citizens, sure, but no one had dared move too aggressively toward a faction known for being fighting fanatics. Now they were ready to make a full comeback as it was now clear to all that they had been on the “right” side all along and that there was a strong bond between the World Leader and their faction.

Miranda had also sent out clear communication that Valhal had been in on the Malefic Viper’s plan and all his scheming, leading to an instant resurgence of their reputation on Earth. The top brass of Valhal naturally jumped at the opportunity to better establish themselves on a planet that had quickly become an important strategic location in the ninety-third universe.

Earth was a planet where so many talents who were sure to make a big name for themselves in the future hailed from. To make it even more important in Valhal’s eyes, a lot of these individuals were humans. Jake, Jake’s brother, herself, Maria, the Augur, Sword Saint, Arnold, and even people like William and Miranda. There were so many

extraordinary individuals from Earth alone, so why wouldn't Valhal want to establish themselves there?

It wasn't a stretch to believe more talented people would also be born in the future, and even now, the average fighter was a lot stronger than the average on other planets. The average level was also surprisingly high, and from the looks of it, people just kept progressing, meeting walls far later than expected, truly hammering home the absolutely overflowing Records of the planet.

Every large faction knew this and wanted a presence if they could, which was naturally part of the reason many had sent people to "help" Earth during Jake's Chosen ceremony.

In truth, Carmen didn't care much about all the politics. She would leave that for the people who knew what they were doing and actually gave a shit. All she cared about was not being ostracized on her own planet and having freedom of movement, and as things were looking, she would have that and more.

The same couldn't be said about some other factions. Many of the faction outposts established by the immigrants from other factions were heavily limited in influence, with them being granted their own little "countries" being in the talks. From how Sven put it, every faction would essentially end up with their own passports and territory, with Valhal looking like it would have a top-tier passport, only below those officially part of Jake's faction and equal to the Court of Shadows.

Speaking of the Court of Shadows, Carmen could only imagine they were happy with how they'd hedged their bets so far. Same for the Golden Road Emperium – the merchant faction Sultan and most of the other big merchants of Earth now belonged to. They had backed Jake or at least stayed neutral from the very beginning and were now reaping the profits for their belief.

Meanwhile, the Holy Church had to be kicking themselves for being such assholes. If only they didn't have such a hate boner for the Risen and vampires, they would definitely also have had their own country at the end of everything, but now it looked as if they would be lucky if they managed to get a single building to use as an embassy.

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Especially after what was about to happen. Because, just before Carmen entered the meeting with all of the City Leaders from Valhal, she got a message sent by Miranda on account of Jake. One that made her smile from ear to ear.

"It's with great sadness I inform you two that I've been called for something more important. The World Leader requires my presence," Carmen said, not even trying to hide how happy she was to have the perfect excuse to bail on what would no doubt be

an incredibly boring few hours of sitting in a meeting she didn't care about in the first place.

"Oh?" Pam said, flashing a teasing smile. "Running off to your boyfriend, now are you?"

"Piss off," Carmen said, waving off the older woman.

"The higher-ups definitely wouldn't complain if--"

"Yeah, no, not interested, and it's not gonna happen," Carmen cut off Sven. "Anywho, I'm off."

"Well, if you just decided to get a--"

"Sven, I'm going to tear your arms off and make you eat them if you finish that sentence," Carmen said, not at all joking.

The warrior shut up as Carmen turned around and quickly left the office building, having successfully escaped the boring political meeting.

When Jake spoke to Miranda when he returned to Earth after killing Ell'Hakan, she had mentioned that Arnold was back in his workshop and didn't particularly want to be disturbed – something he had kind of forgotten, but in his defense, it felt like years ago he'd been told even if it was not even a day ago to everyone else. Luckily, she reminded Jake as he contacted her on the way to Arnold, asking her to get in touch with Carmen as he had to ask her about his upcoming Holy Church trip, and he didn't even know if she was even on the planet currently.

Jake naturally respected the scientist and thus didn't barge in but actually used the main entrance without hiding his presence. He entered the massive dome-shaped structure and was soon met by the receptionist or assistant or whatever she was. Jake didn't know her name or anything about her really, but she had worked there for many years. It was understandable why Arnold liked having her around, though.

She clearly didn't care much about getting to know Jake either and gladly had him sit and wait for twenty minutes after she informed Arnold Jake was there. Something he did without complaint as he made good use of any downtime he had by closing his eyes and playing around in his Soulspace a bit.

After he was given the go-ahead, Jake entered the workshop and headed down to where he saw Arnold through his sphere. The scientist was busy as always, working on some weird tech Jake didn't even bother trying to understand.

"Hey Arnold, I hope I'm not disturbing you too much," Jake said as he walked in, the scientist not even turning to look at him.

“What do you need?” he just asked, knowing Jake so well.

“The thing is, my bow is feeling a bit under the weather, and I’m about to go invade the main planet of the biggest faction in the multiverse in our galaxy, and it would really suck if I couldn’t even shoot arrows at them if they decided to be dicks during my visit,” Jake said with a smile.

“I’m not a bowyer,” Arnold simply said with a deadpan tone.

“I know, I know, but you’re still my best hope of getting anything halfway useful,” Jake said. Okay, he did have a few more options, but he did believe that there was a good chance Arnold had something lying around.

Arnold finally turned around, having finished tinkering with the weird motherboard-looking thing on the table, as he regarded Jake. “I don’t have any bows and have never had the intention to make one. According to all calculations, a bow would lead to a lesser output in all scenarios compared to other methods.”

“Hey, don’t go flaming bows,” Jake said, crossing his arms.

“Bows require physical exertion. It’s a waste of energy to make a construct wield a bow and not simply install a more efficient propulsion device should I wish to shoot physical projectiles,” Arnold answered, his words a bit offensive to Jake’s sensibilities even if he understood.

It probably did make more sense for Arnold just to make a railgun or some shit, having everything run off magic rather than make a robot capable of shooting with a bow. It was a glaring weakness in Arnold’s Path, but no one could be perfect, and Jake could only accept the scientist’s shortcomings.

“So you don’t have anything?” Jake asked, a bit disappointed.

“No bows, no,” Arnold shook his head. “I’m also not ready to provide you with any more upgrades in other areas. Other projects have fallen behind due to recent events, leading to unintended delays I have yet to make up for.”

“Alright... alright,” Jake sighed, wondering what he should do now. Maybe he should go look for some merchants and try to get a good bow from them? It definitely sucked that their universe was still locked out of the rest of the multiverse due to the system event, as if not, he could have gone somewhere with actually skilled crafters that could either help him get a new bow or preferably help upgrade his old one.

As things were, Jake was simply too ahead of the curve for their small galaxy to have what he needed, and there was no way he was going to find a skilled bowyer capable of-

"Why have you not sought out Maria from the Crimson Flame?" Arnold suddenly asked.

"... oh yeah, she was totally a bowyer, wasn't she?" Jake muttered to himself, having totally forgotten what her profession was. In his mind, she always just registered as the one other enlightened person on the planet who knew bows were the best weapon. It did make sense she also knew how to make them, and he did have a bow made by her for a while.

"She is," Arnold nodded, not really having caught that Jake's question was rhetorical.

"Thanks for reminding me," Jake smiled, giving Arnold a thumbs up. "I knew it was a good idea to go here first. Ah, but one last thing... out of curiosity, how many mythical skills do you have by now?"

"Six," the scientist responded without hesitation, making Jake's eyes open wide.

"How the fuck have you tied me?" he blurted out before he quickly remembered something. "One of them is a skill you got from your Blessing from Oras, right?"

"Correct," the man confirmed, making Jake breathe out a sigh of relief because that one totally didn't count, and if it did, Jake would also be able to count his divine skill.

"I'm still winning, then," Jake said triumphantly with a big smile.

"I was unaware any form of competition took place," Arnold responded with his usual tone.

"Not an official one, but if it did, I would have won it," Jake still claimed victory nevertheless. "Anyway, thanks for the tip, and I'll let you get back to your work. Ah, but one thing, I may need your help a bit later. I plan on heading to the main planet controlled by the Holy Church and would like to also keep at least one person in backup while I'm there in case I need support." THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY *novel·fire·net*

"Very well," Arnold nodded, not asking for any details or complaining about Jake giving him more work.

With that, he left and also said goodbye to the personal assistant on the way out. As he left, he couldn't help but once more think about just how scarily talented Arnold was. The guy didn't have a First Sage to teach him, and he also got the feeling Oras wasn't the most hands-on Patron, so he had more or less made all his insane progress on his own.

Just happy he's on my side, Jake thought, also reminding himself to bring the scientist more stuff to experiment with. Best to stay on his good side lest Jake wanted to deal with orbital bombardment beams and void lasers shooting from a few galaxies away in the future.

Outside of Arnold's workshop, Jake decided to enter stealth as Jake continued his quest for a bow, with his first task being to find where the hell Maria was currently at so she could hopefully lend him a hand... or, better yet, an entire bow.

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Chapter 1055: Construction Site Inspection

Locating Maria proved more problematic than Jake had first assumed. He naturally started by asking Miranda if she knew where the fire archer was at or had a way to contact her, and she did as Maria carried one of Arnold's walkie-talkies.

So that was good.

However, when Miranda tried to reach out, she went straight to voicemail. Okay, there wasn't actually any kind of voicemail; the device just never established any connection, meaning Maria wasn't answering for some reason.

So that was bad.

Luckily, it was known Maria had gone hunting earlier that day, and she had even done so on Earth, so they had a rough estimate for her location.

Back to being good!

The place she'd headed was one where a dungeon had been located just recently, one that was definitely one of the highest-level ones on the planet, with a requirement of 300 to enter, and she had, in part, gone to check out the dungeon and report back what the place was all about... after snatching up the Pioneer title for having the first clear, of course.

Now it was suddenly back to being very bad... as one very good explanation for her not answering would be if she was currently inside the dungeon. If that was the case, she could easily be in there for weeks, if not over a month, dependent on how difficult it turned out to be. Far too long a wait for Jake.

Jake had been ready to head out to where Maria should be, but he quickly concluded she was in a dungeon – something Miranda tentatively agreed with – meaning that would just be wasting his time. That's when he got an idea of the one way he could potentially still reach her, even if she was inside a dungeon.

Without further ado, Jake reached back out to Miranda.

“Are there any other members of the Crimson Flame besides Maria on Earth or just in our budding alliance?” Jake asked, his plan pretty simple. If Jake and the other mortals couldn’t reach him, surely her Patron had to be capable, right?

Also, sure, Jake could ask Villy to reach out, but he wanted to avoid that if possible. If he had the Malefic Viper act directly, it could be easily interpreted as Gwyndyr doing the Viper a favor and not just Jake acting like his usual spoiled self and ignoring regular conventions of how a Chosen was supposed to act.

“Let me check...” Miranda said as she was silent for a good ten seconds before she got back. *“Two others beside Maria, both of them blessed by other members of the Crimson Flame Pantheon. Neither of the two are natives of Earth, but both are currently assisting us in wiping out the remaining loyalists of Ell’Hakan. Contacting them should be easy enough.”*

“Great,” Jake said with a smile. *“Can you reach out to them and ask if it’s possible to contact their Patrons with a message from the Chosen of the Malefic Viper? Say that I urgently need to meet with Maria and may need a divine message to reach her.”*

“Do I need to tell you that it may be unwise to involve gods just because you want her to help you to get a new bow?” Miranda shot back.

“Nah, you don’t. Anyway, will you reach out to those two?” Jake smirked.

“Already sent Lillian to do it,” Miranda sighed, knowing Jake so well.

Having sent that message, Jake knew it would take a little while for Maria to get the message, and if she was inside a dungeon, getting out of it again also wouldn’t be instant. Jake considered heading to the dungeon in question, but he didn’t actually know where exactly it was, and chances were it would be faster for Maria just to get back herself than Jake trying to find her.

With some time on his hands, Jake decided to go check out something this entire dungeon thing had kind of reminded him of. He totally hadn’t forgotten that Jake and the rest of Earth currently had a dungeon under construction – and quite a large one at that.

Jake headed out from Haven and toward a small budding city that was slowly being built, centered around a certain dungeon. One that was currently being constructed by a certain someone Jake should really go check in on, lest the frightening All-God Legion get mad at him.

It didn’t take long to get to the town that only had about five hundred people when they began construction, but the second Jake appeared, it became clear it now had at least ten to twenty times that.

This was deep in the territory controlled by the Noboru Clan, and the mountainous terrain had quickly gotten filled out with structures as many of the factions with a presence on Earth also wanted to let themselves known in a place that would no doubt become an important gathering place on the planet in the future.

Jake didn't really care much for any of this, though. He had gone to the city already in full stealth mode, and he had no plans of revealing himself to anyone but Minaga.

The construction site looked much like it had when Jake initially put down his statue there all that time ago. It was still a wide open area with no one allowed to build in a large area around it, and a magic barrier to detect anything intruding had even been put down to keep the area clear.

From the looks of it, there definitely wasn't an entrance to the dungeon quite yet, but Jake still felt the vague presence of Minaga upon the statue. Assuming he could still be contacted through it like when they began construction, Jake quickly snuck into the barrier, quite easily passing through it without even being noticed.

Once inside the magic circle, Jake subtly created a stable arcane barrier so as to not be disturbed or noticed when he hopefully had a little chat with Minaga. There likely would not be an official entrance to the dungeon before it was fully finished, but Jake still knew the Unique Lifeform detected Jake the second he entered the area.

Yet nothing happened as Jake just stood there for a solid ten seconds before he stopped shuffling around impatiently.

"Minaga?" Jake asked out loud, still clearly feeling himself being observed by something unseen. "I kind of know you're here. You can't really be anywhere else."

"You don't know that. Maybe Minaga left because he felt alone and forgotten."

"Nah, Minaga is a strong and independent god. I doubt he would even notice if left alone for a few thousand years," Jake waved off the notion.

"Not all Minagas are the same, and some of them can totally get lonely... especially when they're cut off from all the other Minagas except the ones they're already trapped with," the Unique Lifeform spoke again, still refusing to reveal his projected form.

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"This is the middle of a city, though, and Minaga should be able to at least sense the area around where he's making his Labyrinth. So he really shouldn't get lonely with so much company around," Jake argued.

“... yeah, but what if they’re all super boring and don’t really count as proper company?”

“Well, I’m sorry that normal people are normal,” Jake said, shaking his head. “Oh well, I guess I should leave if Minaga isn’t interested in talking. I would have loved to hear all about how the best and most talented dungeon engineer in the entire multiverse was doing creating this marvel of a labyrinth.”

“If you insist, I can ask for the project leader to update you on the progress,” Minaga quickly said, and after having his ego glazed, instantly summoned a projection as the god appeared with a bright smile on his lips.

“To be clear, I do find it rather rude to just leave me alone like that for so long,” he said first thing, crossing his arms. His voice was also still infused with power, but Jake noticed it was of a different variety than usual. Rather than make his voice louder or more intimidating, it was instead infused with the intent to make it more directed, making anything he said only something Jake could hear. If it was necessary or not with Jake’s barrier, he didn’t know, but he doubted it could hurt.

“Yeah, not gonna lie, things have been pretty damn busy between the Prima Guardian event and everything that went down with Yip of Yore and Ell’Hakan,” Jake said, not really apologizing as he felt like his absence had been well justified. He also knew speaking about the First Sage would be a waste of time, so he didn’t mention his recent vision adventures.

“Did hear chatter you killed the Prima Guardian and stuff,” Minaga said casually. **“Totally a bummer system event, by the way. Feels super weird being cut off from all of the other mes in other universes when it’s not even like I’m stuck in a dungeon or anything like that. Not that I will be stuck in this dungeon when it’s completed. Sure, I can’t leave it, ever, but at least my consciousness won’t be sealed away, so that’s something.”**

“That is something indeed,” Jake nodded. Minaga remaining in tune with his other selves was halfway a requirement for this special mega Minaga Labyrinth to work, as said labyrinth would require him to send clones in the future to help maintain it.

“Anyway, what was that about Yip of Yore? He finally got his act together and decided to not try and fight a Primordial before at least taking down a few more gods to properly build his legend rather than trying to go for the final boss right from the get-go?” Minaga asked, the question confusing Jake quite a bit.

“I thought you had listened in on the city residents and stayed up to date with things?”

“Eh, at most, I picked up a little here and there, but as I said, they’re super boring and it does take some focus to observe the outside world. Definitely not worth it

just to hear more about builders talking about bricks,” Minaga shrugged. “Why? I get the vibe that something big finally happened.”

“Well... I kind of teamed up with Valhal and Yip of Yore’s side and openly insulted and called out my Patron to the entire multiverse. Called him a manipulative piece of shit and a stain on the history of the multiverse, among other things. Was a pretty big deal,” Jake said.

Minaga stared at Jake for a few seconds. **“You’re messing with me, right? You must be because you’re still his Chosen.”**

“Not messing with you whatsoever,” Jake answered with a smile. “But I am definitely teasing you. It was all part of the Viper’s plan to really make Yip of Yore think he had a big advantage... oh yeah, this roasting session of the Viper happened with Yip of Yore present over Primordial-4, having slaughtered his way there in a quest to finally fight the Malefic Viper. Something he did shortly after.”

“Huh, I really did miss out on stuff... or, well, this Minaga did,” the Unique Lifeform said before sighing loudly. “So... Yip of Yore is dead. He was a talented one and it’s kind of sad to see him go. He could have gone far if he’d been more patient and know how to temper his ambition.”

“Can’t say I’ll shed any tears,” Jake shrugged. “Anyway, with Yip dead, I went straight for Ell’Hakan, who’d done a ritual with the help of the Holy Church to become a Usurper. The fight was a bit tougher than expected as the guy was dangerously delusional, but I got him in the end.”

Minaga looked surprised as he thought for a bit. **“I really shouldn’t comment or get involved in all that stuff... but I take it the Holy Church are kind of pissed you took out the guy before they could make use of him?”** Google search novel●fire●net

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Jake sighed, briefly explaining how the soul had been stolen and all that.

“Does sound like a messy situation indeed,” Minaga nodded. “Oh well, nice to hear stuff has been fun for you recently, and for the record, I definitely won’t feel sad that little manipulator got killed. I found his Bloodline super creepy. Anyway, now onto something far more important... the labyrinth!”

Minaga spread out his arms in a grand gesture as he grinned.

“It’s not done yet.”

“I... I know it isn’t, but how is the progress?” Jake asked, not really sure if he would get a serious answer.

“It’s as expected. I’m pretty good at this, you know? Even if this is my first time making a dungeon in this particular fashion. But I’m really making some cool stuff here and even trying out some new things, so keep your expectations high!” Minaga said, not explaining much while still trying to hype Jake up. **“Oh, and before you ask, no, I’m not going to commit to any deadlines. I never keep them, and I don’t care for them. It’s ready when it’s ready, period.”**

“Can you at least give me a rough estimate?” Jake asked with a sigh. “Will I be able to experience it while in C-grade, or will I be B-grade before it’s done?”

“Now that’s just cruel. How would I know when you’ll evolve? Based on your speed so far, you could be B-grade in a couple of years, for all I know. Or, you know, you could get stuck on your evolution quests for a century or two,” Minaga said with crossed arms.

“So you’re committing to it being done within a century?” Jake asked teasingly.

“... you’re really putting me on the spot here, but I can give a temporary estimate that it will be done within the next 100 years. No promises, though! My work always suffers under pressure, and in my defense, I’m used to working on timelines roughly the length of how long this universe has existed,” Minaga kind of gave a commitment.

“Fair, fair,” Jake said, though he really hoped the Unique Lifeform wouldn’t actually take a full century to finish the dungeon. He didn’t think Minaga would take that long either, but all he could really do was wait.

“You’re about to leave again, right?” Minaga asked, knowing Jake so well.

“Yep,” he said with a smile. “Thanks for the update, though. If you really do get bored, I can have some people check in intermittently or maybe come by myself a bit more often... but truthfully, it does kind of feel like a waste when I can’t – and probably shouldn’t – give any feedback or help with anything.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. The system event is just annoying, and I would like it to be over sooner rather than later,” Minaga waved Jake off. **“Now go and have a nice chat with the Holy Church and solve the conflict in the most diplomatic fashion possible.”**

“Did you know I also ended up destroying Ell’Hakan’s entire planet?” Jake said with a bright smile.

“... maybe don’t do that this time?”

“I don’t plan on it, but you know, accidents happen when people act carelessly and make bad choices.”

“Sometimes you act like a complete heretic, and at other times, it’s really easy to see you’re the Chosen of the Malefic Viper,” Minaga just shook his head. **“Now shoo. Get out of here, and don’t involve me in your war or whatever. You’re not even wearing a hard hat and shouldn’t have entered the construction site to begin with while lacking proper safety equipment. This is a clear safety violation, and I don’t want another unfavorable inspection from health and safety.”**

Jake looked at the wide-open area all around him and just chuckled. “Fine, I’ll leave in a safe and orderly fashion. I need to leave anyway, just got a message I had been waiting for.”

“... wait, did you only visit me because you were waiting to hear back from someone and wanted to kill some time?”

“What? No, of course not!” Jake said, acting all offended. “I only visited you because waiting to hear back from someone reminded me you were even here in the first place. Anyway, see ya!”

With those words, Jake headed off, Minaga yelling after him as he left to finally meet up with Maria.

“I’m definitely leaving a mean reference or easter egg about you in the labyrinth! You mark my words!”

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Chapter 1056: Thieves At The Lodge

Using Gwyndyr to contact Maria had been a bit of a gamble, as truthfully, Jake hadn’t even been confident the god was able to. There was still a bit of a veil between the ninety-third universe and the rest of the multiverse, but now it could at least be pierced a little. Doing so wasn’t that hard from inside the ninety-third universe, and Jake hoped that gods could poke through if they really needed to. Maybe they wouldn’t be able to communicate directly, but they should at least be able to send the divine version of a quick shoulder tap, right?

Jake didn’t know if it worked like that, and Villy hadn’t tried to reach out to Jake even once, but that wasn’t really a surprise as the god clearly preferred Jake being the one to establish contact. If it was because he couldn’t or because he respected Jake’s time and didn’t want to disturb him, Jake didn’t know, but he had a feeling that even if the god could contact Jake, he wouldn’t.

The only reason he ever contacted Jake normally was because he could literally see what Jake was up to and if he was busy, thus knowing if it was a good time. Now he couldn't, meaning it was entirely possible Villy tried to reach out while Jake was in the middle of a fight or on the most important step of concocting his best poison yet. This text is hosted at novel~fire~net

Anyway, none of that overly mattered as clearly Gwyndyr and Maria had somehow made contact, and the fire archer was on her way back to Haven already. It would take a little while for her to arrive, but luckily, as Jake was heading back, he was informed that Carmen had also made her way to the quaint little forest town.

Only a single teleport later from what he'd dubbed Labyrinth City – Jake wasn't sure if that name was actually official yet – he was back in Haven. Miranda informed him that Carmen would just head straight for his lodge for them to meet there. Jake just quickly confirmed as he returned home to his own little valley.

Arriving at the valley, he indeed found Carmen already there, having clearly just arrived. However, his smile quickly faded as he spotted her through his sphere and saw what she was doing. In her hand, she held a precious stolen artifact. What's more, she was even consuming it with much vigor.

Jake walked into the valley and instantly made eye contact with the Runemaiden as she spoke in between bites. "Hey, Jake! Damn, these bananas are good, even tastier than the last time I had one."

That's right... she had stolen one of Jake's bananas straight off the musa. He stared at her, holding back himself from yelling thief as he crossed his arms. "Are you even getting any Agility from consuming it?"

"Hm? No, all capped out in that department," Carmen answered completely shamelessly, finishing off the poor banana that hadn't even been allowed to fulfill its purpose of giving permanent stats.

"You do know that according to the law in Haven, you just committed grand larceny, stealing a valuable treasure like that," Jake said.

"As a representative of Valhal, am I not kind of a diplomatic and have immunity or something?" Carmen shot back. "Besides, you asked to meet me, only nice of you to offer a banana to a guest."

"I didn't offer one."

"It's your word against mine, and I explicitly remember you telling me that I could take as many bananas as I want," Carmen said with a grin as she reached out to grab another.

Oh no, you don't!

Jake instantly reacted by using One Step and teleporting over, gripping Carmen's wrist before she had time to pluck the poor banana from the musa. The Runemaiden just stopped as she looked at Jake.

"You're really protective of this tree, huh?"

"Not a tree," Jake insisted.

"If it looks like a tree, smells like a tree, and acts like a tree, I'm gonna keep calling it a tree," Carmen shrugged, though she did pull back her hand. "Anyway, why did you need me so urgently?"

"I don't think I ever said it was urgent," Jake said, a bit unsure.

"Well, I told others it was, which was why I had to sadly skip a big meeting with a bunch of City Leaders. You should know the sacrifices I'm making to be there and all the political talk I'm missing out on," Carmen said, faking a sigh.

"Oh, woe is you. How about this, to make up for it, I'll ask Miranda to host an even bigger and longer meeting just for you to take part and really feel part of the political arena," Jake teased her back.

"I think I'll pass. I prefer arenas that allow you to punch people," Carmen shook her head.

"Hey, punching someone in the face is the number one way to instantly turn a political meeting at least five times as interesting," Jake grinned before he finally got to the actual reason he'd called her over. "Have you heard what happened with Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church?"

"Only vaguely," Carmen said, also focusing up as the mood got more serious. "I think they took his soul or something?"

"Yeah... they plan on using it to resurrect him for the Bloodline, and..."

Jake proceeded to explain what had gone down after he'd killed Ell'Hakan – while also going on a side tangent about his actual fight with the Usurper at the urging of Carmen. The explanation ended up being a lot longer than Jake had planned, but in the end, Carmen got the gist of it. For the most part, anyway.

"I'm still not sure... is the Augur an ally or not?" Carmen asked.

"Kind of neither? Maybe both? Something in between?" Jake said, still not entirely sure what Jacob actually wanted at the end of the day. Clearly, he wanted to enact some

change in the Holy Church, but how that would look was yet to be seen. “All I do know is that, in this instance, he wants to see Ell’Hakan and his Bloodline gone from the multiverse for good. And we need to strike sooner rather than later before they get the chance to flee out of the universe and actually resurrect him and his damn Bloodline. No way getting to him if he ever reaches the Holy Church heartlands.”

“I’m with you that far, but do you really need my help? I doubt the Holy Church has anyone capable of fighting against you, and while they could try to stall you with numbers, won’t that just result in their planet going the way of Ell’Hakan’s?” Carmen voiced her thoughts.

“I don’t plan on making it a habit to blow up planets whenever I want to kill someone on it,” Jake muttered. Not that it wouldn’t be a great way to assure people wouldn’t mess with him...

“Fair enough,” Carmen shrugged. “But they should know the option is on the table if they try to start shit. Actually, why are they even allowing a scenario where fighting you is an option? Wouldn’t it be way smarter to teleport whoever is carrying the soul around all the time, just avoiding you until the universe opens back up?”

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“Jacob is carrying the soul,” Jake clarified.

“Oh... well, I guess that’s why,” Carmen muttered. “Still, why would that Bertram guy say it would be smart to keep me as a backup? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining and more than happy to have skipped out on a boring as fuck meeting; I just don’t get the reason.”

“I have a theory...” Jake said, proceeding to briefly share his thoughts, and after doing so, Carmen instantly understood.

“Very well, I’ll be ready to go in if you need me, then,” Carmen nodded. “I guess Arnold will teleport you there, and then I can just stay back and be ready to also be teleported should the need arise?”

“Exactly,” Jake nodded. “I plan on going by myself in the beginning. If I bring along an entire group of powerhouses, or even just a second person, it’s gonna look like an invasion even on the surface. However, if I go alone, I’m just responding to their call for negotiation Miranda informed me of. Well, I don’t think they like me visiting their planet for this negotiation, but no one ever said I couldn’t either.”

Jake had actually thought this through at least a little and would act with some measure of level-headedness.

He knew that despite everything, the Holy Church was not an easy enemy to have, and he wanted to at least leave the door open on both sides to reach a compromise down the line. If the upcoming scenario could be framed as just a fringe group from the Holy Church acting out of pocket while mostly cut off from the rest of the multiverse, it left a way for both Jake and the Holy Church to save face after Jake effectively kicked their asses and got rid of Ell'Hakan's soul.

With Ell'Hakan gone for good, the Holy Church had no need to want to keep Jake an enemy either. As a mega faction, the Holy Church tended to be mega-pragmatic, and if they had nothing to make Jake an enemy over anymore, they just wouldn't. As a faction all about unity and whatnot, they could be surprisingly quick, cutting off their members who proved too problematic... then again, what was more Holy Church than sacrificing the good of the few for the good of the many? Because keeping Jake as a long-time enemy would more likely than not result in many bad things happening.

However, all paths to any kind of short-term compromise would be cut off should Jake come barging in with an entire army. His intent to openly attack the largest faction in the multiverse would be evident to even the dumbest of observers. At that point, the Holy Church would need to respond with force to not appear weak, starting a far more drawn out feud.

Truthfully, Jake would prefer to fix this entire thing without having to kill a whole bunch of people he didn't really want to kill. He had no desire to fight the Holy Church as they, quite frankly, didn't have anyone among their ranks that Jake found worth fighting, and he'd never been a big fan of fighting larger groups, which was definitely what he was about to face should things go south.

Despite his apprehension, he didn't have any doubt that no matter what, this would end with Ell'Hakan's Truesoul sent back to the system to hopefully never be recycled again. There was no scenario it could end any other way.

"So when are you going?" Carmen asked.

"We're currently waiting for Maria to get here," Jake said, making Carmen look at him weirdly for a second before he clarified. "During my fight with Ell'Hakan, my bow began to really show that I got it before Nevermore and got really close to breaking. So I'm gonna need a new one for this upcoming planetary visit. One that can hopefully tide me over till the universe opens back up, and I can head to the Order for a full proper upgrade. I reckon Maria is my best hope to get a good one, considering she's a bowyer."

"Oh, I see," Carmen nodded before smirking. "I couldn't imagine having to rely on such a feeble thing as a weapon. Truly a horrible weakness."

“Pretty sure you’re far more feeble than Eternal Hunger, even if you’re a Runemaiden of Valdemar,” Jake shot back, quickly taking out the katar as he spun it in his hands a few times before dismissing it again.

“That weapon can change shape, right? Can’t you just make it into a-“

“Tried it, doesn’t work,” Jake shook his head. Right as he said this, he realized Carmen had definitely already known as she grinned.

“More durable but definitely less flexible, it seems.”

Jake shook his head and was working on another comeback as he sensed a strong aura approach the valley. He stopped halfway through his headshake and looked toward the entrance as it got slightly warmer in the valley as the fire archer walked in, looking as if she’d really rushed her return. Her hair was a mess, her leather armor was in less than stellar condition, and she’d definitely burned through – pun intended - a lot of resources getting there.

That’s probably why she just stopped and stared a bit at Carmen and Jake, who just stood there rather casually. She took a second or two before she asked:

“What’s the emergency?”

Jake stared back at her for a moment before scratching the back of his head. “I wouldn’t really call it an emergency per-se...”

“Jake ruined his old bow and needs a new one, and since you’re a bowyer, he wanted to ask you for one,” Carmen instantly chimed in.

Maria looked back at Jake who really didn’t have a good answer as he just smiled meekly. “Was there some kind of miscommunication?”

“I got an emergency order to return to Haven immediately straight from my Patron,” Maria said, not returning Jake’s smile. “I left the dungeon with the final boss in my line of sight.”

“Okay, I see that I’m definitely in the wrong here, but in my defense, I do really need a new bow, and it is time-sensitive,” Jake said, knowing he didn’t have much ground to stand on. So, to escape the awkward situation, he tried to change the topic as quickly as possible.

“Also, how did Gwyndyr contact you? Are gods capable of piercing the limitations placed on our universe and send messages if they really want to? Or do you have some other kind of skill to communicate back and forth?” Jake asked.

Jake knew there were some skills gods had that allowed them to “contact” those they blessed, this contact often coming in the form of demands of some kind. In other cases, such as Valhal making offerings after a fight, that would also create a faint connection to the gods for them to then latch on to even if the connection was weak.

Luckily for Jake, Maria was willing to share despite clearly not being in a super good mood.

“The Crimson Flame is a mercenary group first and foremost. Just like your profession is about both alchemy and being a Chosen, my profession is about being a bowyer as well as a mercenary of the Crimson Flame. My Patron used one of my profession skills to give me an official assignment... they’re essentially quests that higher-level members of the mercenary company can give out,” Maria explained, Jake nodding along with genuine interest.

“That’s pretty damn neat,” Jake said, feeling like they had totally moved past the fact Jake may have fucked up a li-

“It was an assignment of the highest level. One that once granted, I must immediately act upon, or I will not only lose my Blessing but be branded a heretic and have a bounty put on my head for desertion,” Maria said, only making Jake feel more and more awkward about everything.

Fortunately, Maria soon sighed, but then she did something Jake hadn't seen coming. On her way over to sit down on the steps up to the porch of the lodge, she went by and plucked a banana right off the musa just like Carmen without even asking first... and this time, Jake didn't feel like he could call her out on her thievery as he just silently watched her eat it before she spoke again.

“I thought something bad had happened in Haven since I was told to return so urgently, so to find out nothing was wrong... at least I got a lot of merit points for completing the assignment.”

“I want to ask more about these merit points and whatnot, but I feel like you’re not super in the mood,” Jake began as Carmen again cut him off.

“So instead, he’s gonna ask you for a bow, and he definitely isn’t going to be satisfied unless it’s a really good one,” Carmen said.

“Well, I would more than gladly offer compensation,” Jake quickly corrected her. “But she isn’t wrong in that I need a bow, even if it does feel a bit shitty to ask for one now. I hope you can at least make it back to the dungeon in time for the Pioneer title.”

“I should,” Maria sighed. “Just give me a moment to catch my breath and I’ll go over what I have... hopefully one of them can be used for... what was that time-sensitive thing you need the bow for so urgently?”

“Pay the Holy Church a visit to snuff out the Truesoul of El’Hakan before they can flee from the universe,” Jake answered honestly.

“You know what? I’m not even gonna ask, and I’m gonna act as if I didn’t hear anything because that’s definitely not something I wanna get involved in,” Maria sighed yet again. “Now let’s see if there’s any of these you find useable...”

With those words, Maria summoned five bows in front of her; Jake finally at the final stage of his “obtain a new temporary bow” quest.

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Chapter 1057: Bow Quest Completed!

Jake considered the five summoned bows closely, his immediate reaction being one of pleasant surprise. Sure, he’d known Maria was probably pretty skilled at making bows, considering she was a genius only behind people like the Sword Saint and himself, but that had only been when it came to combat. He had used a bow made by her before, sure, and that bow had been okay but definitely not top-tier.

However, it seemed that she had improved far beyond Jake’s expectations. Of the five bows summoned, four of them were ancient rarity with the final one surprisingly a legendary bow. Assuming the bow she was using herself was also of legendary rarity, she had at least crafted two of them.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that the legendary bow presented also gave off the strongest aura by far and had the most impressive look. It looked to be made entirely of metal, with the string even reminding Jake of molten metal with how it even gave off a subtle glow. However, upon closer inspection, it wasn’t actually made of metal but some other material. Jake wondered what, but a quick Identify told him. Follow current novels on *novel~fire~net*

[Obsidian Blazebow of Kindling (Legendary)] – A bow with a body made from obsidian infused with potent fire energy and a string crafted using the sinew of an adolescent dragon. Its creator, a genius bowyer and master of flames, has further elevated the materials. The bow is incredibly conducive to fire affinity energy and becomes more durable the more fire energy is infused into it. Relatively fragile when faced with powerful physical attacks. Significantly increases the damage done by any fire-based bow attacks made. As the bow is used, all fire energy infused into it will lead to kindling and heat building up within that can be

unleashed by infusing it into an arrow. All attacks with this bow will deal additional fire damage, increasing further as the bow is kindled.

Requirement: lvl 285+ in any humanoid race

Reading the description, Jake was definitely impressed. Obsidian could come in many shapes and sizes, with its power dependent on the lava it was created from, meanwhile, it didn't need to be said that the sinew of a dragon wasn't super easily come by. It definitely wasn't crafted from resources Maria had acquired herself, and the fact her faction had invested such valuable ingredients in her to improve her crafting was proof they also viewed her as talented and thus worth nurturing.

However, despite his praise for the bow, there was one problem.

"Give me your honest opinion... I can't use this bow at all, can I?" Jake asked Maria.

"I don't know, that's why I took it out. Give it a try and see if it'll bind to you," Maria shrugged, Jake doing as she said.

Taking the bow, it felt incredibly hot to the touch. The glass-like surface sat surprisingly smoothly in his hand, though, and Jake's assumptions of his grip slipping had been entirely unfounded. He did wonder how it would bend, considering it was made of such rigid material... but he quickly realized he wasn't even gonna get as far as to test that.

The moment he infused a bit of energy into the bow, he immediately felt something was off. His mana dispersed upon entry, and the bow only began to heat up enough for Jake to begin feeling a slight tinge of pain. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on as Jake let the bow go and put it back down.

"Not enough fire affinity?" Carmen asked with a teasing smile.

"According to the damn bow, no," Jake shook his head, unable to say he was disappointed as this was the expected outcome.

"I figured," Maria shrugged. "Still, from what I remember, you infused the last bow I gave you with your arcane affinity and made it useful that way around. While it would suck losing a bow that's already good as it is, do you reckon you can transmute it into something useful for you?"

Jake looked at the bow for a few moments before shaking his head. "I'm not confident, no. At least not enough to take the gamble."

It had been a while since Jake transmuted an item like this, and he knew there was a good chance that things wouldn't go well, especially not with this bow. As the description said, it was relatively fragile toward physical blows and was very specialized

toward fire energy. Obsidian was also a material with innate fire affinity, so if he wanted to transmute it into his arcane affinity... yeah, he wasn't even sure it could be done.

Even if he did successfully transmute it, it would definitely end up a worse overall product. Considering how Jake had already been a bit of an asshole toward Maria by dragging her there in a rush, breaking a bow that she'd clearly spent a lot of time and effort crafting would also just only add insult to injury.

"How about any of the others?" Maria asked, sounding a little disappointed Jake didn't want the legendary bow.

Jake checked out the four other bows at her prompting and did a quick analysis. Two of them ran into the same problems as the obsidian bow, with them being far too attuned to the fire energy to Jake's taste. As for the final two, both were contenders. However, it was the last and final bow in the row that attracted his attention the most. It was one Maria clearly didn't have much confidence in, even as she explained what it was.

"This is a weird one," she began. "It's one of those things you make just for the experience and to make different stuff once in a while. It's made from Titanwood from a tree monster only found in B-grade and above. Massive fucking trees, I tell you, with the ability to change their size. I tried to integrate a bit of that, and while the final result is okay, I don't really think it's super useful. Cost-wise, it definitely wasn't worth it, though, as this one was as expensive if not more so than the legendary bow."

Nodding along, Jake used Identify on the bow to get a full idea of what he was dealing with.

[Mighty Titanwood Greatbow (Ancient)] – A powerful bow made for a powerful wielder. This bow was created by a talented bowyer, bringing out the innate powers of the material used. With a body made of Titanwood and a string from the sinew of a behemoth, this is truly a bow meant only to be wielded by the mightiest. The Titanwood Greatbow can change size and grow up to ten times larger without losing any durability, while it may lose some material integrity if grown beyond that. Records of the behemoth have fused with the Titanwood, allowing some of its Records to bleed through. Strength adds an additional damage modifier to this bow beyond the usual.

Requirements: lvl 290+ in any humanoid race. 25,000+ Strength

As Maria had said, it was primarily made of Titanwood, and he didn't doubt it was incredibly durable. Far more than the legendary bow. He was also surprised to see that materials from a behemoth had been used during the crafting process. Behemoths were monsters that – just like dragons – were natural B-grades.

However, while dragons were innate masters of magic, the behemoth was the exact opposite. They were purely physical powerhouses, their sheer power often enough to

rip anything of their own level apart. Not to mention their large size, which made them terrifying opponents to face.

For the record, Jake was definitely going to hunt one down at some point. One of the reasons he even knew about them was because he'd studied creatures he'd for sure want to fight one day. Behemoths had definitely made that list alongside dragons, leviathans, phoenixes, and pretty much any other mythological creature Jake had ever heard about that actually existed in the multiverse – which turned out to be nearly all of them.

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Anyway, back to the bow, Jake could definitely see the potential, even if Maria wasn't as optimistic.

"As you can see, it's not really an archer's bow, but made more for warriors who want a bow as a backup weapon," Maria shook her head. "I naturally can't even use it. I don't know if your Strength is high enough, but even if it's not, perhaps you can transmute that effect away?"

"No worries, I have the Strength required," Jake said with his nearly 33,000 Strength, which was definitely a stupidly high number for an archer, but seeing as Jake ended up in melee half the time, he kind of needed it. Plus, it wasn't like Strength wasn't a good stat when using a bow.

"Would I be right to assume that out of everything, this bow is definitely the most durable?" Jake asked the bowyer.

"For sure," Maria instantly confirmed. "Stupidly so. The draw strength required isn't to be underestimated, and I honestly wouldn't be surprised if it could double as a staff to just whack people with."

Jake didn't even think that was a joke as he picked up the bow and studied it more closely. He also instantly noticed something else with it.

"Is it just me, or is the mana-conductivity absolutely shit?"

The words weren't meant to be offensive, and Maria clearly didn't take offense either, as she just nodded and sighed. "Yeah, as I said, good for a warrior, but for someone with a more hybrid build like you and I, it is indeed a very shit bow. As it is right now, that is. However, I get the feeling you may be able to turn it into something usable, which is part of the reason why I presented it to you."

"You're not wrong," Jake said, continuing to inspect the bow. "To be clear, me doing any kind of transmutation to the bow will completely ruin the materials and make it impossible to reuse any of them in the future."

"I'm not loaning you a bow; I'm trading you one," Maria said.

Jake, who was still holding the bow and even already had a good plan in mind for how he wanted to transmute it, stopped himself and looked at Maria. "What kind of trade are you thinking? I'm swimming in Credits, so—"

"So am I," Maria interrupted him. "We both know neither of us is struggling for Credits, and if we were, we have backers more than happy to throw near-infinite amounts at us."

"True," Jake said, not really able to argue against that one. "So what do you want instead?"

Maria turned serious as she looked at Jake. "Nothing now... just that you'll owe me a favor, and not just for the bow but for the expedited delivery. Not a massive favor, but you will owe me one."

Jake returned her serious look, and Carmen also chimed in after having not been involved in their bow talk. "That's a lot to ask for a bow."

Carmen was entirely right. It was a bit odd to think about, but Jake and the two women at the lodge had reached a level by now where favors had become a legitimately powerful currency. What's more, Jake was fully aware that him owing Maria one didn't mean she had to cash in while they were still in C-grade. She could ask him for a favor in B-grade or even when he was in A-grade if she so desired.

Villy had told Jake many times that words held power, so Jake lying without having any intention to honor his promise could have an actual tangible impact. Even if it didn't, Jake wasn't the type to just make empty promises, and Maria knew it.

It was a lot to ask for a bow... but Maria had helped Jake in the past. This wasn't even the first bow she'd given him. Also, while she was clearly taking advantage of the fact that Jake had fucked her over by having her rush to his aid, it was nevertheless a fact Jake had been an ass in that regard and felt bad about having done so.

That's why he ultimately just sighed. "Very well, but it can't be anything extreme or something I would never agree to help anyone with in the first place. So a medium favor or something like that."

"Deal," Maria said with a bright smile, clearly happy with the outcome.

"You do know that you effectively just agreed to help her out with a mercenary assignment in the future, making it so you actually just promised to help out the Crimson

Flame at least once,” Carmen very accurately pointed out, having a quite good idea of how those kinds of organizations worked, considering Valhal was also kind of a mercenary organization.

The biggest difference between the two was that in Valhal, individuals or small groups of companions agreed to work as mercenaries without the top brass getting involved. Meanwhile, the Crimson Flame were far more organized with a top-down, almost militaristic style. They could assign Maria with jobs as Gwyndyr had evidently done to make Maria leave the dungeon, while the only times Valhal would ever have anything come down from the top was if Valdemar declared war... and even then, that wasn't really an order. Everyone simply followed the War God without question as he tore a path of death and destruction across the multiverse.

“I am well aware of its implications,” Jake answered with a small nod after a moment of thought. “I assume she and the Crimson Flame know not to go overboard.”

“We're not stupid,” Maria smiled as she got up. “Well, this turned out to not be that bad of an outcome. I'll take my leave now and rush back to the dungeon as quickly as possible. Ah, in case any of you two wanna go, it's pretty much just a large volcano and the land surrounding said volcano inside. Once you reach the volcano, there's a long path going through the mountain before reaching the final boss in a core chamber below. You can use the tunnel or you can just fly above and head for the final boss right away by diving down into the lava, though it will be stronger if you do it that way. The boss is level 330, so not too bad experience, and you should be able to clear it within a few days at most, dependent on how fast you are at navigating and moving about. So for Jake, I reckon he could do it within hours, not days.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Jake said with a slight smile, mainly because he now knew he had no intentions of going to the dungeon. Level 330 was simply too low for him to consider it worth the journey. Would it give him experience? Sure, but Jake really wanted to only hunt peak C-grades right now... or perhaps even his first B-grade.

But for now, he had a bow to transmute and a Holy Church to invade.

After Maria left, Carmen gave Jake some space, and he instantly got to work. He already had a very vivid idea of how he wanted to transmute the bow, and there really was no need to delay as Jake began the process.

Jake's plan was to do away with the ability of the bow to change size by forcefully condensing it and stabilizing its condensed and small human-sized form. This would not only increase the durability of the bow significantly, but during the compression system, he could also do a little something else.

With the bow in hand, he sent in pulses of destructive arcane energy during the entire transmutation process, creating veins of destruction within the otherwise stable wood.

These veins were there to address the lack of mana conductivity, and while the result wasn't pretty, Jake was confident it would work.

The materials created clearly carried the entire process, being able to handle Jake's incredibly heavy-handed transmutation. The entire process ended up taking around two hours before Jake was done, and as he succeeded, he saw something unexpected.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 310 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 306 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Jake nearly felt called out for not having done transmutations in a long with that level-up. Especially considering it had come just after he'd gained the Anomalous Soul upgrade that should make gaining levels harder.

Not the he complained as he looked down at his "new" bow.

[Mighty Arcane Titanwood Greatbow (Ancient)] – A powerful bow made for a powerful wielder, augmented through the power of arcane transmutation. This bow was created by a talented bowyer, bringing out the innate powers of the material used before then being transmuted by an even more talented alchemist. The durable Titanwood has been infused with the concept of stability, losing its ability to change size in exchange for higher durability. Arcane pathways have been burned through the durable wood, giving it acceptable mana conductivity for the type of arcane magic used to create the pathways. Records of the behemoth have fused with the Titanwood, allowing some of its Records to bleed through. Strength adds an additional damage modifier to this bow beyond the usual.

Requirements: lvl 300+ in any humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound. 30,000+ Strength

The requirements of the bow had gone up, with the level and Strength requirements both getting higher, not to mention the Quasi-Soulbound effect that effectively just meant that one was required to have Jake's exact arcane affinity to be able to use the bow.

Besides that, he'd achieved everything he wanted with the transmutation. Overall, he would say that he'd made it into a worse bow, but it was definitely better for him. Still not even close to as good as his old bow, but for now, this would have to make do.

Carmen also quickly noticed when Jake was done and walked out of the lodge where she'd been meditating... Jake having obviously noticed her sneaking out twice to steal bananas when she thought he was too focused on using Touch of the Malefic Viper to notice.

"I take it everything's ready now?" she asked, none of them mentioning the banana thievery.

"Yeah, as ready as can be," Jake nodded and looked at her. "Time to pay the Holy Church a visit."

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Chapter 1058: The "Negotiations" Begins

The Holy Church had already reached out with the intent of finding a peaceful solution shortly after Jake returned to Earth after slaying Ell'Hakan. After he killed Bertram, they were understandably worried about what actions Jake would take next. However, from the looks of the communications Miranda received, they genuinely believed they could reach a satisfying solution where they could walk away with Ell'Hakan's Truesoul, and Jake could get "rightful compensation."

Yeah, with them thinking that, it definitely made sense that they wanted Ell'Hakan, considering just how delusional they already were. Still, Jake at least wanted to appear reasonable, even if he had no intentions of acting in any way the Holy Church would find reasonable.

That being the case, Jake expected it to eventually devolve into violence. The Holy Church had long pulled back all their elites, with many of them not having been involved in the conflict to begin with. Truthfully, no one knew just how much power they had in storage, but Jake didn't feel any sense of fear.

The only thing he possibly had to fear was being forced into a wasteful slaughter. He genuinely hoped the Holy Church knew that fighting would be futile, but things rarely turned out that smoothly.

Only half an hour after Jake finished transmuting his temporary bow, he stood ready on the teleportation platform prepared by Arnold, who was also there to observe and – if necessary – also send Carmen over. Jake considered if he should call others for backup but decided not to. Sylphie was off somewhere on Earth, spending quality time with her parents if Jake's guess was correct, with everyone else also busy doing their own thing. Not to mention a few weren't even on the planet in the first place, or the fact that people like Caleb couldn't get involved due to his faction, and while Casper would have probably loved to go, bringing a Risen along was a surefire way to make them instantly start blasting.

“Ready?” Arnold asked, making Jake refocus as it was finally go-time.

“Ready as can be,” Jake nodded, and without further ado, the teleporter below him activated.

While it was true the Holy Church had invited Jake and Earth to a dialogue about how to solve their differences, there was no direct invitation to visit their main planet in the Milky Way, which was also why Jake used Arnold’s special teleporter that didn’t require permission.

Jake felt his vision shift as soon he found himself just outside the atmosphere of the Holy Church planet. Instantly, he saw that the local World Leader had done quite a lot to defend the planet, with powerful barriers fused into the environment everywhere. The thing is, the barriers defending planets couldn’t be too good unless they were of a high enough level. If they were, mana from the sun and the rest of the universe couldn’t easily come through, weakening the entire planet.

So, instead, the barrier was more there for detection and to destroy anything unidentified. This left quite the obvious flaw, as for the barriers to know if something was unidentified, it had to be able to see and identify the object in question in the first place.

Activating his Unseen Hunter skill, Jake quite easily snuck through the barrier and entered the planet before he rapidly headed toward the surface. Arnold had gotten a lot better with his teleporter and had even been able to focus it and teleport Jake to appear directly above the biggest gathering of presences on the planet, which unsurprisingly happened to be the capital city.

Before even breaking through the clouds, Jake saw the massive city below him. It looked like it was made entirely of marble, with large buildings and spires everywhere. From the looks of it, the local city plan also required at least one church or building of worship for every hundred meters based on how many there were.

The biggest building in the city was a large cathedral-looking structure on a slightly raised plateau. Even from up high, Jake could feel this was where the most auras were gathered... oh yeah, and he also felt his Hunter’s Mark still lingering on Jacob’s body, telling him the Augur was within.

Jake had considered for a while how he wanted to approach this, and one thing was for sure, he wasn’t going to do anything sneakily. In his mind, he wasn’t in the wrong for anything that would happen that day, as he was merely there to take back what was rightfully his.

That’s why Jake gladly introduced himself to the entire city. Floating not far from the large cathedral, Jake dispelled his stealth skill and unleashed his aura, even mixing in a bit of Pride to really up the intimidation factor. Within seconds, guards of the city took to

the air, and not even ten seconds later, a group of what Jake assumed to be elites had also gathered nearby, watching on with careful eyes.

Jake remained silent as more elites gathered until, finally, the people in charge made their appearance. Jacob, Bertram, and a bunch of people in priest robes and fancy attire exited the cathedral, and the moment it did, Jake's will-infused voice echoed throughout the city.

"I believe you have something that belongs to me."

Iludar opened his eyes as the message arrived. The Chosen of the Malefic Viper had just reached the Holy Church's Milky Way headquarters, signaling it was their time to move.

He quickly sent several messages to check on matters and received nearly instant responses, confirming everything was as expected. Looking up, he saw the nervous elf standing there, clearly unsure of what had been decided. Understandably so.

"We have safe houses set up all across the Milky Way. All we have to do is survive until the universe opens back up. You know as well as I do that this is your only chance for survival," Iludar said sharply.

"I know, I know, but it doesn't make it any less nerve-wracking," Kindroth, also known as the so-called Voice of the One, replied, his demeanor far from his usual self-assured one.

"Collect yourself. We are in a hurry," King Iludar said, regarding his followers of elites. "There's no turning back now."

"Yeah, so let's just get this over with," Kindroth said, recollecting himself and taking a deep breath.

With those words, they activated the large teleporter that had been hidden away by the planet of the Great Bright One. It was linked to the Prima Vessel and was merely there to allow the teleportation of more people at once.

Their plan was simple: strike Earth while it was vulnerable. King Iludar knew that the moment El'Hakan died, he was on borrowed time, and he didn't trust that the Holy Church would tide them over long enough for their escape to the rest of the multiverse.

So rather than simply sitting back and waiting for death, they would land a decisive strike where it would hurt the most. They would prove themselves to the Holy Church and any other force that still opposed the Order of the Malefic Viper to hopefully secure a good future.

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All of this was happening with the support of the Holy Church and their loyal subject, Kindroth.

The Great Bright One wasn't officially a member of the Holy Church but might as well have been in many aspects. It was a god in a gray zone that could do things the Holy Church normally wouldn't while still receiving support from the Primordial faction under the table.

As someone who followed the Great Bright One, Kindroth was similar. He was a perfect spy who was not officially part of the Holy Church, so he could sneak under the radar in many cases.

Kindroth had been a source of information for this entire campaign and long before that. He was a traitor to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and both he and Iludar knew what kind of fate awaited him when this was inevitably discovered. The elf had also dug himself deep on his planet with the persona he'd created for himself, and rather than try to dig himself out, he'd been more than happy to just jump ship. The fact that he had been ordered by the Holy Church certainly also played a part.

And now, with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper gone, they had their chance to strike. Kindroth had also confirmed that every other fighter who was a major threat wasn't around, and Iludar's own spies had confirmed this. Even the cultist of the void and the Runemaiden weren't in the city, giving them a window.

The teleporter beneath them soon activated, bringing them all to the Prima Vessel on Earth. Warriors appeared one after another, filling the vessel so quickly they had to funnel into the halls as everyone charged out.

On the way, they met no one, as Kindroth had indeed done his job and cleared the way. They easily made it out, and with Earth still unaware that a massive invading force had arrived, they reached the teleportation station close to the Prima Vessel to teleport to an area set up by Kindroth beforehand.

Attacking the witch within her city wasn't the wisest move, but what if her trusted ally and fellow council member led her away from the safety of her fortress?

--

Jake floated in the air, his presence blanketing the city as he felt millions of eyes on him at once. Just the sheer scale of the city meant that any form of clash would result in many deaths, something Jake would still like to avoid.

"Chosen of the Malefic One," a priest with fancier robes than the others spoke as he flew up to meet Jake. He was probably a head priest or something, but Jake truthfully didn't care. **"Your visit is highly unexpected and irregular."**

Jake really, *really* wanted to call bullshit on that one, but he held his tongue as he instead kept up his intimidating presence. **“You wanted to talk. I came to talk... and take back that which is mine. That which you took from me.”**

He repeated that they had taken something from him to really hammer home the point that this had to be the starting assumption for this entire talk. It needed to be clarified from the get-go that Jake had arrived with justification, and it was very purposeful he said all this in front of so many followers of the Holy Church.

Below, he saw Jacob look up at the head priest guy, and a moment later, the man cleared his throat, speaking a lot more softly so none of the citizens below could hear. “Perhaps we can have this discussion elsewhere in private?”

“Very well, lead the way to this private discussion,” Jake said, once more wanting to make it clear he was just following the Holy Church guys to some unspecified location. The man in front of him didn’t look very appreciative, but he couldn’t really do or say anything as he nodded and turned.

Following the lead of the head priest, Jake flew down while still keeping a good distance from everyone. He released a few pulses and noticed dozens of small teleportation buildings spread across the city, many of them now having elites gathered around, waiting.

Jacob, Bertram, the head priest, and seven other official-looking members of the Holy Church were part of Jake’s “escort” as they entered a small cleared-out teleportation hub.

“I apologize for the lack of a proper welcome, but as I said, we truly didn’t expect you to show up without prior notice,” the head priest reiterated that he believed Jake’s visit was very sudden.

Perhaps it was partly true, as they had more likely than expected him to be more injured after the Ell’Hakan fight than he actually was. It was thus highly probable they had wanted to make more preparations before Jake visited that they simply didn’t have time to.

“Please follow me through the teleporter,” the head priest said, motioning toward it.

“Using a teleporter with an unknown destination seems highly unwise, especially when in territory I do not find particularly friendly,” Jake said, staring down at the priest. He’d only slightly let off on Presence while he kept unleashing his aura, fully aware of the mental pressure he was putting on everyone present.

“It will take us to an installation far away from the city, and what awaits on the other side is no trap,” Jacob chimed in, being curt with his words. Jake did catch something, though.

A military installation, Jake quickly concluded simply from the word installation, as honestly, in what other instance would someone use that word to describe a location?

“Fine,” Jake agreed as he teleported alongside the ten members of the Holy Church.

A moment later, he appeared in another small building, and right as he did, he naturally released a Pulse to get the lay of the land. They were now in a new city, a lot smaller than the other one but still pretty damn large.

However, rather than a normal city, Jake instantly recognized this one wasn’t... how to say it... real? It was a ghost city. Nearly all the buildings were entirely empty inside, with the only ones having any actual activity the ones with teleporters placed in their cellars.

If this was some failed expansion project or a weird military city to train urban combat, Jake really couldn’t tell, but he did know for sure it was now a military city. Within mere seconds of Jake arriving in the new city, over a thousand fighters teleported into the cellars of the many buildings throughout the city, seemingly setting up should things go wrong.

Overall, he did like this new setting, though, because outside of the city, there was nothing for hundreds of kilometers in any direction. They were well and truly isolated, which meant far fewer casualties should Jake end up having to go with the violent option.

“Please, this way,” the head priest continued as he motioned Jake out of the teleportation building and into what looked like some kind of town hall. Jake kept watch of his surroundings, and the fact that Jacob walked all the way in the back with Bertram and seven other high-tier C-grades between Jake and the Augur didn’t escape him in the slightest.

Jake remained silent as he merely followed them, as he felt the many observers. A quick Pulse confirmed there were now more than five thousand people in the city, and if Jake was correct, they were all top fighters of the Holy Church. Pretty much all the faction could muster should this turn into a fight, at least when it came to people who the Church believed could at least contribute.

He also finally properly probed the others in the small escort group, and while they all wore priest robes – besides Bertram, of course – five of them clearly weren’t actually priests. Their auras simply didn’t match the signature he would expect, and their level of power also made it evident they were fighters.

An elite party, Jake concluded right around the time they all found themselves in the wide open lobby of the building Jake had assumed to be a town hall. There, the head priest summoned a table and a set of chairs.

Jake looked at them but remained standing as he crossed his arms. “This really shouldn’t take long, so let us get this over with.”

Staring directly at Jacob and Bertram, Jake scoffed. “Those two interfered in my battle against the Usurper of Yip of Yore and stole part of my rightful bounty.”

“Bullshit,” Bertram reacted, with Jacob instantly calming him with a hand on his shoulder as he stepped forward.

“Apologize for my Guardian’s outburst. Your last encounter wasn’t a pleasant one for him either,” Jacob spoke with a tone Jake remembered hearing many times in the past during soulless business calls.

“I shall not deny that we claimed the Truesoul of Ell’Hakan, the Usurper of Yip of Yore, but we only did so after you had already taken what you had come to take. We are, at worst, scavengers infringing on your leftovers, but I object to us being branded thieves. We only took what you were unable or unwilling to claim in the first place.”

“You talk as if any of what you just said matters,” Jake said, openly pressuring Jacob with his aura. “No matter what I wanted to do with what’s mine, it has nothing to do with you. All that matters is that you stole something from me; that’s the end of it.”

Okay, admittedly, Jake hadn’t really entered this so-called “negotiation” with a mindset for compromise... but Jake got the distinct feeling Jacob wouldn’t want Jake to be in a *too* diplomatic mood either.

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Chapter 1059: One Final Gambit

The atmosphere in the negotiation room wasn’t great as Jake had clearly set himself up as a highly contentious negotiator who wasn’t easy to convince of anything, much less reach a compromise with. Still, the head priest tried.

“Please relax. There’s no reason for us to be antagonistic toward one another,” the head priest raised his hands. “I do not disagree that you did indeed have some – if not perhaps even primary – claim of the Usurper’s soul, but the Holy Church has also invested heavily in him.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of that,” Jake said, staring down at the man. “You not only assisted him during this conflict in the Milky Way but even facilitated his Usurper ritual.”

The tension instantly grew as Jake broke it slightly by smiling. “Thanks for that, by the way. Made the fight a lot more interesting and enjoyable. I don’t even want to imagine how disappointing his power would have been if he hadn’t been empowered by Yip of Yore’s Records.”

Jake wasn’t even lying with that one, those were his genuine feelings. Feelings he could see evidently threw the head priest off quite a bit, as in his head, it probably didn’t make much sense to thank people who actively sought to make your enemies stronger.

“However, that still doesn’t make up for all the shit you did in the rest of the galaxy,” Jake said, his smile gone. “You helped Ell’Hakan kill a lot of people and create a lot of chaos. Manipulated entire civilizations. You quite clearly positioned as an opposing force in this conflict, and now you want me to consider the Holy Church’s investment in the enemy leader of this war?”

“I know it’s presumptuous, but... yes,” the head priest sighed. “Ell’Hakan holds incredible value to the Holy Church. Not just in the minds of us mortals, but even the gods have made it clear they require us to bring his Truesoul to them. They are also the ones who invested so much in him. We, as mere mortals, are merely following the will of the gods. Soldiers on a quest we do not even know the true purpose of... only that failure is not viewed as an acceptable option.”

Jake did have to hand it to the priest, he wasn’t bad at his job. He had clearly also studied Jake quite a lot with how he framed everything. It was well known that Jake had a particular view of freedom and that he preferred to fight powerful opponents, so the priest was trying to make it as clear as possible that they didn’t want to fight or truly had any personal reasons to fight.

He was effectively saying that should Jake be aggressive, he was just killing soldiers following orders.

The thing is, Jake had always viewed that excuse as complete and utter bullshit. There was always a choice, and the head priest had clearly already made his. He probably couldn’t even imagine going against the Holy Church... or, more accurately, the branch of the Holy Church he was working for.

Jacob was clearly from a faction that would prefer for Ell’Hakan to be permanently removed from the multiverse. At least nothing else would explain his prior actions. However, he couldn’t show this outwardly, and he even went as far as to speak up and argue for them to keep the Truesoul despite their previous encounter.

“Storing a Truesoul is not an easy matter, and I would like to inquire if the Chosen of the Malefic Viper even has a method should we hand over the Truesoul?” Jacob asked calmly.

It was effectively a rhetorical question, as Jake naturally didn’t. The only way to forcefully take and store a Truesoul was by using a Transcendent skill, and needless to say, Jake didn’t have one of those lying around.

The only reason why Jacob had been able to store the soul was because Ell’Hakan had given prior consent and the Usurper ritual had imprinted him with Records facilitating it. At least, that was the working theory.

Truesouls were usually the domain of the system only, after all, and every member of the Holy Church knew that. Thus, they also knew that Jake “losing” the Truesoul of Ell’Hakan wasn’t really a thing, as it was never something he could have taken in the first place. Something the head priest had also alluded to before. However, even if Jake couldn’t take the Truesoul, it didn’t mean he didn’t have something he wanted to do with it.

“I already had intentions toward the Truesoul, but you stopped what was meant to happen,” Jake simply said, crossing his arms while glaring at the Augur.

“And what might those intentions be?”

“As I said, exactly what you stopped from happening,” Jake continued in a sharp tone. “I faced Ell’Hakan with the intention of giving him a true death, and you taking his Truesoul made that not the case. My hunt isn’t finished before the Truesoul returns to where it belongs, and I don’t take it kindly when people interrupt my hunts.”

Once more, Jake’s words were very purposefully chosen. The Holy Church wanted to present that they were operating under the orders of their gods. That they had no real choice in the matter.

Jake argued that he also didn’t really have a choice. That backing off would go against his Path, and who was the Holy Church to ask Jake to compromise? What kind of compensation could possibly be adequate to convince the person who’d ranked number one in all of Nevermore to compromise their own Path?

The mood in the room changed yet again as Jacob’s face fell – great acting, by the way – and Bertram even moved half a step closer to the Augur. As for the head priest, his expression was also dire, even if he hadn’t quite given up yet.

“This truly puts us at an impasse,” he said, sighing. “We truly cannot hand over the Truesoul, and you do not seem willing to accept any outcome that doesn’t involve you leaving without the Truesoul returning to wherever they go once dispersed. Am I correct in that assumption?”

“That does seem to be the gist of it, yeah,” Jake nodded, the negotiations having definitely fallen apart by now. Which, to be fair, was bound to happen if both sides were unwilling to compromise in any way whatsoever. Jake just had to feel like he at least tried and gave them a chance.

He was almost ready for things to take a violent turn as the head priest turned out to have one final gambit.

“I hoped we could reach some kind of compromise, but it seems that’s impossible,” the head priest began. “However, perhaps there is someone you can reach an agreement with. As I said, we are operating under the direct orders of the Holy Pantheon, and I have been granted the honor of allowing you an audience to directly commune with the one who initially wanted to recruit Ell’Hakan into the Holy Church.”

Jake had to be honest; that was a bit of a plot twist. He had expected to negotiate with some mortals, but it appeared like that wasn’t where the diplomacy would end. Getting such an offer instantly made Jake suspicious, though.

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He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, yes, but Jake was still only a mortal. Gods tended to be quite arrogant, and based on all Jake had gathered, the god from the Holy Church who had originally struck this deal with Ell’Hakan couldn’t be weak.

That is to say, a top-tier god of the Holy Church was offering to directly negotiate with a mortal... either the god in question was an oddball, or something fishy was going on. It also had to be considered that summoning a god from the Holy Church to communicate with Jake couldn’t be cheap or easy, considering the continued semi-lockdown of their universe.

All in all, he was suspicious, but he still ended up agreeing, if for nothing else but his own curiosity. If things ever got dangerous or risky, he trusted his intuition to warn him anyway.

The look on the face of the head priest also made Jake think this could be a legitimate offer, as he genuinely looked as if he’d just offered Jake the best damn present imaginable.

“Very well,” Jake ended up nodding, and the slight look of disapproval on the head priest’s face only made Jake more assured there was some legitimacy to the offer. If not, the priest wouldn’t be so offended that Jake wasn’t elated at the mere offer of being in the presence of one of the Holy Church’s great gods.

“Allow me the honors,” the head priest said as he moved to the side of the town hall building. There, Jake saw the etchings on the domed ceiling that he embarrassingly

hadn't recognized earlier as a formation. In his defense, it didn't really look like one, though. It looked more like an artistic mural with actual pictures and stuff, but upon closer inspection, there definitely was a bit of energy hidden within.

The head priest got down on his knees and placed his hands together as he prayed in front of the mural. His body began to glow with holy energy soon after as the mural responded. The two priests who had come along supported the older man, as this clearly took a toll on him. Compared to a Chosen like Jake with a direct connection to his god, this poor priest had to do way more.

At the end of it, he even took out a brooch and held it high, Jake instantly feeling that this wasn't some low-rarity object. The brooch began to shine before shattering into pieces in a shower of holy light mere moments later, filling the room with light that quite frankly felt uncomfortable as it washed over Jake. Luckily, this light rapidly gathered and began to take form, and as it did, a new aura manifested within the room.

The head priest was already down on his knees but was soon joined by everyone else from the Holy Church, including Jacob and Bertram. Jake felt a few disapproving glances being thrown his way, but he didn't budge in the slightest as he stayed standing, even as the subtle aura of a god began to bear down on him. An aura that contained something that surprised Jake and instantly put him on guard.

By now, the figure of light was nearly fully formed. The projection summoned by the priests wasn't of the highest quality visually, but at least it could show the general form of the god in question.

The figure before him was tall and thin, though Jake was not sure if size mattered at all in this context. The god wore what looked like a normal robe and had a fully humanoid outline, though again, hard to tell their race before ascension just from that. The only other truly notable thing was the person's hair. It was long, around knee-length, and floated in the air unpredictably.

This figure looked down, but even before that, Jake already felt the god and even a number of other gods all observing him. He looked up to meet the eyes of the figure made up entirely of glowing yellowish holy light as he let the god speak first.

“Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I’ve heard much of your exploits and peculiar nature,” the god said in a booming voice that Jake couldn't determine if was male or female.

“I can't say I know much about you considering I don't know who I'm conversing with,” Jake spoke bluntly, feeling quite a few death stares on him, even from Jacob and Bertram... and this time, he really couldn't tell if they were genuine or not.

“You are speaking to the Lodestar Matron, the Fourteenth of the Holy Light,” she spoke, the name Matron pretty much confirming she was a woman.

Plus, Jake already had some insight into the Holy Church and thus instantly knew what “Fourteenth of the Holy Light” meant. He also knew who the Lodestar Matron was. Her being Fourteenth of the Holy Light meant she was the fourteenth god to ever ascend in the Holy Church, meaning she was old. Really old.

She was a god not focused on combat, but one who lived up to her name of being a guiding star for everyone her light fell upon. She was a bit like an Augur in that respect. The Lodestar Matron also held a very high position in her faction as she was one of the top people in charge of one the most important parts of the Holy Church:

Recruitment.

For her to want Ell’Hakan... yeah, it made sense. Moreover, it being the Lodestar Matron also explained why the Church had wanted her to speak to Jake directly. He also now knew why they had struggled a bit with making the formation.

It wasn’t easy allowing the effects of her Bloodline to also bleed through, after all.

King Iludar remained wary as they prepared everything. Even now, he remained skeptical of Kindroth, but so far, the elf had done everything as they’d planned. The spot he had chosen was also a good one.

They were in the middle of a mountainous region not that far from Haven but far from any other settlements. Iludar had already sent scouts to check out the entire area while constantly staying ready to retreat should anything go wrong. He’d spent a lot investing in a very expensive escape token that would allow him to travel over a million kilometers away upon activation. Would this leave him in the middle of space? Yes, but that was better than being outright slain and at least gave him a path to survival.

Not that he planned on using it.

“What’s the progress on the formation?” he asked the mages, who were busy putting down a magic circle meant to suppress the magic of the witch.

“It’ll be done within ten minutes,” the mage confirmed, much of the work having already been done beforehand as they were effectively just transcribing a not overly complicated sealing formation. Fresh chapters posted on **novel■fire■net**

“Good,” he nodded before quickly checking in with the ranger team he’d sent to follow Kindroth. They were the best stealth experts he had, and alongside some of the few spies and scouts he still had left on Earth, he confirmed that the elf was doing his job. He’d arrived in Haven and was now to drag out the witch.

This is our one chance, he told himself for the umpteenth time. In truth, Iludar still wasn’t sure why they wanted the witch who served the Malefic’s Chosen dead that badly. Sure, killing her would create chaos and trouble for the Chosen, but it wouldn’t cause any

major damage in the long term. He could always just get another manager for his planet from the Order once the universe opened up.

Still, it wasn't something for him to question, and this remained their best hope for a good future. As losers of war and former loyalists of dead gods, what faction would want them? What faction would risk making enemies with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper? His unique abilities made many factions view him favorably, and Iludar was well aware that his own value and the value of his army weren't high in the grand scheme of things.

That's why he would do everything to grasp this chance given by the Holy Church. Kindroth was the same. A traitor with no home who was forced to flee alongside them. A massive fall from grace for the so-called Voice of the One, but Iludar truly shouldn't speak, seeing as his title of King was simply for show now.

A few more minutes passed, and everything was still as it should be. Iludar had eyes on everyone of note or had intel about their locations, making him more confident than ever. Soon enough, he also received a message.

Kindroth was on his way. It appeared that he'd also taken that assistant of hers along, but that was truthfully expected. A number of elites from Haven also joined them, which was once again also expected. There were a total of nineteen people in her escort group, with one of them even an old plant by Iludar and Ell'Hakan that Kindroth had helped assure was close to Haven's leadership.

Soon it's time... Iludar breathed a sigh as he looked at the finished formation and the thousands of elites hidden in wait under several concealment formations they'd also pre-prepared.

This was the best chance they would ever get, and either the witch or he and his army would die today... and he had no intentions of dying. Even if one of the true elites of Earth could show up unexpectedly, Iludar felt confident. One person could only stop so many, and it wasn't as if Haven could instantly summon an entire army to match his. Besides, all they had to do was kill the witch, and if he had to escape on his own afterward...

Well, his entire army would die, true, but that was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

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Chapter 1060: Question(s) Of Trust

“Are you sure your report is accurate?” Miranda asked as she flew alongside Kindroth and Lillian with their escort in tow. “While I wouldn’t classify this area as well-explored, I find it difficult to believe our scouts would have missed a hidden dungeon.”

“Yeah, tell me about it, I was also surprised,” Kindroth answered, shaking his head. “I was definitely baffled when I stumbled upon it. It was hidden in the valley due to a naturally formed formation creating illusions, which was definitely how everyone missed it. Also, while I haven’t entered the dungeon yet, from the name alone, I believe it’s also one filled with illusions.”

“Still,” Miranda insisted with a suspicious tone. “Dungeon entrances tend not to be that easily missed.”

“The entrance itself is just a tree right in the center of the valley,” Kindroth continued. “Again, I only noticed it because of the formation and the movement of mana. The tree was right there in the middle, and I just had to go inspect it. That’s when the system notification popped up.”

“Hm,” Miranda said, in thought for a moment. “Were there signs of others having entered it before?”

“I didn’t really look, but... wait, you’re thinking that...?”

“Yeah, it’s entirely possible someone has found it before and merely never disclosed it to anyone. That way, they could not only get the Pioneer title but didn’t have to share anything with anyone else. Perhaps they are even considering selling the information about the dungeon. That, or any party who has found it and entered simply never returned.”

“Does sound possible, even if the level requirement to enter is only 280,” the elf commented.

“If it’s anything like the Undergrowth with quite a wide level scale, coupled with illusion... certainly doesn’t sound like a pleasant place,” Lillian chimed in, getting nods from not only Miranda and Kindroth but a few of their escorts.

“It should be just up ahead,” Kindroth said after a little while. “If you feel for it carefully, you may even be able to detect the subtle mana of the natural formation from here.”

Miranda looked to focus for a brief while before nodding. “True, I do feel some faint echoes of mana. Does have a signature similar to a concealment formation.”

“Right, makes sense,” Kindroth nodded. “I wouldn’t really be able to tell. Not an expert in formations and all that.”

"I'm well aware," Miranda simply said, their group getting closer and closer until soon the deep valley Kindroth was leading them toward came into view.

As he said, there truly was just a single tree sitting in the middle of it, with only grass in all directions around it. Kindroth directed them down as Miranda and her entire escort group landed in front of the tree.

She went forth to inspect it, and that's when Miranda frowned. "This is no dunge-"

Right then, pillars of light shot into the air from the mountains on all sides. A web of disruptive magic enveloped the entire valley, and Miranda looked taken aback as she stumbled away from everyone, only Lillian staying by her side.

The different elites from Haven also looked around as auras erupted from all around them. They were completely and utterly surrounded, the formation that had been activated even partly locking down space alongside most of Miranda's magic getting severely weakened.

Right then, one of Miranda's very own escorts even jumped away from all the other elites and made distance, his former comrades staring after him as he retreated toward the enemy forces who greeted him like an old friend coming home.

Right then, a singular aura more powerful than the others revealed itself as the enemy leader stepped forth. Someone Miranda instantly recognized as her eyes opened wide in surprise and horror.

"King Iludar."

"Witch of Haven," the man spoke with a confident smile. "I hope you like the place chosen to be your grave."

When Jake felt that the summoned god possessed a Bloodline, his initial reaction was that the Holy Church had seriously fucked up. They had to know Jake wasn't a fan of Ell'Hakan, in large part due to his Bloodline, so for them to send someone else with one focused on mental manipulation was just bonkers.

However, that wasn't what happened. The Lodestar Matron's Bloodline was well known in the multiverse and a large aspect of how she'd reached her current position. It wasn't one about mental manipulation or even one that affected the minds of people at all. In fact, it did something a lot of people wanted to be done to them.

It was so much more valuable than merely mental manipulation as it had the absolutely outrageous passive effect of increasing all experience and even Records gained for all those who had bathed in her presence. No, it didn't require them to stay within the presence, just the mere fact they had ever once in their lives been within her presence

while also being aware it was her doing it, they would be affected by the Bloodline... with stipulations, of course.

It only worked for those who followed her. Not in that they had to be loyal to her but that they had to look up to her and view her as, at the very least, some kind of spiritual guide. Hence the name Lodestar. She was a guiding star, hanging in the sky above all those who had been blessed by her presence, shining down a faint light helping illuminate their Path.

From what Jake knew, the effect of the Bloodline was only marginal for regular people, with the true effects coming to those who directly followed her Path or had her as their Patron. Still, any kind of effect making progress faster was humongous. Even just a 1% increase in people managing to reach C-grade, because they had once in their life experienced her presence, would result in a fuckload more C-grades for the Holy Church.

For support-type Bloodlines, the Lodestar Bloodline, which Jake assumed it was called, was definitely toward the very top.

Now, what did all this mean for Jake? Well, to put it bluntly, fuck-all. The Bloodline had no effect on Jake as he didn't meet the requirements to be affected by it. He didn't view the Lodestar Matron as some superior being at all, and he most certainly didn't follow her Path.

Knowing that she was actually a significant figure in the Holy Church did bring up a lot of questions, though. Ones he quite frankly didn't even bother asking, but her presence did at least mean the Holy Church was serious when it came to reaching a peaceful compromise.

That, or they were trying to use a god to intimidate Jake and make him back down. The following few minutes would let him know which was which.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lodestar Matron," Jake said with a nod. "I've heard much about you."

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The god was silent for a few moments as she smiled, the movements of her face pretty damn hard to really tell due to the low-quality projection that was used. Follow current novels on [novel★fire★net](http://novel-fire.net)

"Truly peculiar. You're entirely untouched by my Bloodline; I cannot even feel you're in its presence. Do allow me to clarify, while my Bloodline does not allow me any insight into those touched by it, I am at the very least able to distinguish those it affects and those it doesn't. For you to remain untouched even after

knowing who I am... either your faith in the Malefic One has entirely warped your view of gods, or you innately simply cannot view yourself as lesser to one. I presume the latter,” the Lodestar Matron spoke quite frankly and honestly, which did surprise Jake a bit.

He chose not to confirm or deny either of her theories as he instead focused on the topic at hand.

“I have been told I’m quite an oddball more than once,” Jake said with a shrug. “And I will admit I’m surprised you have come to speak with me directly. As things stand, I have a hard time seeing what your presence will change. Unless you are here to authorize them to give me that which is rightfully mine, what do we have to discuss?”

Jake’s demeanor once more earned him a lot of angry glares from behind. While those around him had begun to accept his attitude toward gods by now, these members of the Holy Church sure weren’t very accepting.

Surprisingly, the goddess didn’t seem to care much as she spoke.

“A Bloodline is a tool. You and I are both fully aware of that. Yet you appear to only view the Usurper’s as a weapon. You only see the negative aspects of it and the dangers. I will not argue against its danger, you and many others of your galaxy have experienced it first-hand at the hands of Ell’Hakan. Because of that, I understand your apprehension to allow its continued existence,” the Lodestar Matron spoke, and from the sounds of it, her plan wasn’t to intimidate but actually convince Jake.

“Instead of thinking of the dangers it poses, I want you to imagine the boons it can bring. To understand and affect the emotions of others could bring far more good than you can even imagine. People can be raised out of despair, find hope and new meaning even when life appears pointless, or get confidence when they have the skill but not the mindset. It can help make people their best selves. Healing magic can heal both the body and even the soul to some extent... but there is no skill that can heal the heart. This Bloodline can.”

What she was saying reminded Jake a bit about when the Viper had theorized Ell’Hakan ending up with the Dao Sect. Jake didn’t argue that the Bloodline potentially, theoretically, *could* do a lot of good, but his problem was that he seriously doubted it would be used for the betterment of the multiverse.

At most it would be used for the betterment of the Holy Church, and Jake wasn’t sure that was something he wanted.

“Never once did I argue it couldn’t do any good. However, from all I’ve seen until now, it’s a goddamn disaster in the wrong hands,” Jake said, crossing his arms. “Besides, it’s a moot point in the first place. This isn’t about whether Ell’Hakan’s Bloodline is good or

bad but about you involving yourself directly in my hunt to steal the Truesoul without permission.”

“We are both aware this has far more to do with your dislike for his Bloodline than merely your desire to make your hunt complete. You already fully won. Ell’Hakan is dead, the Celestial Child no more. All that remains is mere remnants that will never be a threat to you, and neither will what can be brought back from his Truesoul. Not to you or anyone. We can make sure of that.”

“I do despise his Bloodline; you are right on that, but that still doesn’t change the fundamental facts of what happened,” Jake kept insisting.

“You’re right. The Truesoul is rightfully yours. That’s why we are even having this discussion in the first place. We at the Holy Church do want to make you whole, but for that to happen, there needs to be room for negotiation. Suppose you refuse to budge even the slightest in every aspect, then you are right that this is pointless, but allow me to give you an offer at least,” the Lodestar Matron spoke, her entire demeanor continuing to surprise Jake simply by how reasonable she was being despite Jake clearly not being the most receptive.

“I understand that you have your Path, but we also have ours. You can have his Truesoul, but not now. I’m not asking for you to give it to us, but merely borrow it for a time. Allow us to resurrect what remains of the Usurper and have him fulfill his oath to us, after which he is yours to do with what you want once more. Or, if it’s easier for you, we can dispose of him in your stead,” the Lodestar Matron spoke in an emotionless voice.

“Your assessment that the Usurper’s use of the Bloodline was reckless and dangerous was entirely accurate. That’s why anyone with it needs direction from birth. Guidance. People who can understand it and control how it’s used. Chances also are that any offspring of the Bloodline Patriarch will be weaker than the Usurper, lessening the threat level. I am aware this will temporarily delay the full completion of your hunt, but the fate of Ell’Hakan will remain sealed, the circumstances of his final end still in your hands.”

Jake really had to do a double-take of what the Lodestar Matron had said to make sure he hadn’t heard wrong, but nope. Her offer was... fuck, it was cold as ice. She effectively offered to resurrect Ell’Hakan for only a brief period and have him “fulfill his oath” of making a few kids before the Church would happily ship off the expecting father straight to Jake for slaughter. Or, you know, just off him themselves at Jake’s behest. They effectively told him that they would lease Ell’Hakan from Jake for a while without contesting his life belonged to Jake.

It wasn’t even an option Jake had considered for a moment, and the mere fact she offered it really put things into perspective. The Holy Church was known as a “force for

good” in the eyes of many, and it did have a general philosophy of maximizing the happiness of as many people as possible.

All it took was the sacrifice of the few. Individual mortals didn’t matter. They were just resources. The Holy Church was like a company, caring about optimizing cash flow and increasing profits while limiting losses, but they truthfully couldn’t and didn’t care about every cent leaving their accounts. Sometimes, there were simply expenses, and from the sounds of it, Ell’Hakan was a resource they would happily write off when he was done fulfilling his purpose.

Again, really fucking cold. Yet Jake couldn’t help but be interested in what more the Holy Church was offering.

“Let’s say I am in the slightest open to that idea; why would I possibly agree and take such a risk? What are you offering?” Jake questioned, once more just ignoring the glares burning into the back of his head from the Holy Church members present. They were probably mad that Jake wasn’t crying tears of joy because a god was actually negotiating with him.

“Firstly, the Holy Church will fully pull out of the Milky Way Galaxy under terms and conditions set by you. Secondly, we will naturally offer material goods to a level that will satisfy you while at the same time remaining reasonable. These materials can include resources exclusive to the Holy Church if you so desire. Thirdly, you will naturally have the gratitude of the Holy Church, and we can all walk away here today knowing that despite our differences, compromise can always be reached and a future without conflict is possible,” the Lodestar Matron said.

“I shall personally swear upon everything that has been offered today. I will even add that for the next ten thousand years, not a single descendant of the Usurper will be allowed outside of Holy Church territory.”

Jake had to admit, she was clearly serious in these negotiations. He also knew how hard it was for the Church to offer anything Jake would actually want. Giving him money was pointless, so what was offered was close to all they could offer. Materials usually exclusive to the Holy Church were also very valuable, primarily due to their exclusivity, and if Jake took this offer, the conflict in the Milky Way could end right there and now.

With a single nod of approval or just one word, Jake could put a stop to everything.

However... the price wasn’t small. Jake despised Ell’Hakan’s Bloodline and what it was capable of doing. He wanted it gone from the multiverse. Agreeing today would allow its continued existence. Sure, it would be under the control and supervision of the Holy Church, and Jake did trust that the Holy Church would have that shit on lock and could effectively control everyone with the Bloodline. That wasn’t the problem.

Truthfully, Jake had come to the Holy Church only with the intention of putting up the front of wanting to actually negotiate. He just wanted to at least have the Church be the aggressor, giving him just cause to start what was bound to be a slaughter.

The Church had obviously also expected this as a likely outcome based on the thousands of elites all around him in the empty military installation. They were fully ready to fight should negotiations break down, but with everything he'd seen so far, their ideal outcome was definitely one where no fighting had to happen.

In the end, the deciding factor for what his answer would be probably came down to one simple matter:

Could Jake really trust the Holy Church with Ell'Hakan's Bloodline? Could he truly live with the knowledge it was still out there, even if Ell'Hakan was gone?

It wasn't easy, but ultimately, after considering everything carefully, Jake knew his answer...

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- Chapter 1061: Breakdown In Negotiations

Chapter 1061: Breakdown In Negotiations

Yeah, fuck no, I don't.

While Jake certainly believed that the Holy Church would use Ell'Hakan's Bloodline efficiently, he didn't trust that they would only use it "for good."

Because in the eyes of the Holy Church, anything that helped their faction was for the greater good. Were they going to use the Bloodline to try and create super therapists? Probably. Were they also going to use them to manipulate World Leaders and convince people to join them through emotional fuckery?

Most certainly. In fact, there was even a chance they ended up being worse than Ell'Hakan had ever been. Not to mention the slight chance they failed to fully control the ones with the Bloodlines, or what if someone had a mutated version stronger than expected? There were so many ways things could go wrong.

If Jake said yes, he would be like one of those scientists in movies agreeing to experiment on that one super dangerous alien pathogen just discovered, his decision ultimately leading to an absolute disaster. Jake didn't want to be that kind of character.

That's why Jake ended up shaking his head. "I see the sincerity behind your offer, but I can't agree to any agreement that does not involve the return of Ell'Hakan's Truesoul to the system where it belongs. His Bloodline should die with him, end of story."

His words instantly worsened the mood in the room as Jake refused to move even when a god directly proposed a deal. From the looks of it, everyone – besides probably Jacob and Bertram, who were auditioning for an Oscar – fully expected Jake to ultimately end up agreeing. Why wouldn't they? In their minds, it was ludicrous to disrespect gods in any way, and Jake not accepting a god's offer would definitely qualify as disrespectful in their minds.

"Are you truly certain of your decision?" the Lodestar Matron asked, disappointment in her voice.

"I don't easily change my mind," Jake simply responded.

"Am I to assume this is also the opinion of your Patron?"

"No idea, but I'm fairly confident he wouldn't disagree with whatever choice I make today. Contrary to you guys, he respects when something is not his choice to make," Jake spoke, taking a not-so-subtle dig at not just the god but the entire Holy Church.

"You are aware that we also can't simply give up the Truesoul, correct? We already invested far too much to walk away with nothing," the Lodestar Matron tried, seemingly unable to comprehend why Jake was being so stubborn.

"I'm pretty sure that's called the sunk cost fallacy. It's a fallacy for a reason. Sometimes, you need to know when to cut your losses. This is one such time," Jake said in a calm voice.

He continued to not want to start a fight if he could avoid it. By now, Jake had accepted it could very well happen, but he still believed the Church had the chance to make the right choice. He at least wanted to give them the chance to.

"I fail to understand the source of your stubbornness. Are there guarantees you remain unsatisfied with? Is there truly nothing that could make you compromise? The value of the Truesoul is high, yes, but only to us. There must be something you value that we can offer," the Lodestar Matron said, sounding more confused than before.

Evidently, she also desperately wanted to avoid a fight. The Holy Church had to know it wouldn't end well for them, right?

"There really isn't anything you can offer, no," Jake shook his head and sighed. "My mind is set. However, I don't think this meeting is a waste of time, even with that being

the case. One thing you said I do fully agree with is that it would be nice for us to leave on good terms today. To leave without unnecessary bloodshed.”

The god stared down at him, Jake continuing.

“The Milky Way Galaxy is rapidly coming under my control, and at some point, a final clash is bound to happen between our factions. There is a lot of bad blood between the Holy Church and many of the people in my budding alliance, but I do have the power to allow the Holy Church a peaceful ending in this conflict. I can promise safe passage for all members of the Holy Church out of the Milky Way Galaxy once the universe fully opens back up, and until then, you will be left alone on the planets you currently control. Perhaps we can even discuss the Holy Church being allowed some continued, although minor, presence in the galaxy.”

One thing that Jake believed the Holy Church had gotten entirely wrong from the get-go of these negotiations was that they were happening between equal parties. That most certainly wasn't the case.

The Church was a defeated combatant who'd backed the wrong leader in a war. They were the final holdout of the Milky Way Galaxy, and Jake barely viewed them as a real threat. At least not before the universe was opened up and the Church had the opportunity to funnel in reinforcements, but even then, Jake was confident the foundation he and his allies would have in the galaxy would be strong enough to resist.

He also had to recognize that the Holy Church was the largest faction in the multiverse. Even if Jake didn't want them to, chances are they would end up retaining some level of presence, if not on Earth, then somewhere else in the Milky Way. They were very much a melting pot, and he couldn't possibly expect Miranda to weed out any member of the Church. That being the case, Jake preferred their presence to at least be out in the open rather than some hidden cult.

However, it seemed his offer wasn't that well received.

“You wish for us to not only give you the Truesoul but admit total defeat and retreat from the galaxy under your supervision? Without you offering anything in return for such a major concession?” the Lodestar Matron asked, seemingly flabbergasted at Jake's audacity for that to be his offer to a god.

“I *am* offering something in return. The lives of all those that will inevitably end up dying in a pointless conflict,” Jake said in a cold tone. “Let me be absolutely clear for there to be no confusion. This is now a negotiation for the terms of the Holy Church's absolute surrender. You know as well as I that should the fighting begin, the winner is already determined. Be that the fight that could break out between me and the many fighters you have spread throughout the city, including the party of elites right in front of me, or if we're talking about the armies under my alliance versus the remaining forces of the Holy Church.”

The god was silent despite Jake's shift in tone, making him shake his head before sighing.

"Look, you backed the wrong horse in this race. Put too many eggs in the Ell'Hakan basket. Whatever idiom you wanna use, it's a fact that you lost, and my side won. The only true choice you have left is if you want to lose with dignity or foolishly struggle until the end, countless people dying meaningless deaths in the process."

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It was easy to see that Jake had purposefully taken charge of the negotiations now, much to the displeasure of everyone in the room. Jake, having identified not only the army surrounding him but the party of elites in the room also clearly spooked them a bit, making Jake seriously question how little the Holy Church truly knew about him.

"The sunk cost fallacy, you called it," the Lodestar Matron spoke after a while. **"An accurate description beside the fallacy part. You continually fail to realize how much value this Bloodline holds to us. Even if the chance to retain it is small, we'll have to take it. No matter the sacrifices, we have to, at the very least, try."**

"You're seriously willing to let that many people die for a gamble you have no way of winning?" Jake asked, thinking that now the god in front of him was the one being wholly unreasonable.

"I return that question to you. Are you willing to kill anyone and everything standing in your way to get a Truesoul you have no use for? Simply to deny us having it?"

"Whatever happens is not on me," Jake simply spoke, not going to get dragged into that logic. They had already established that the Holy Church was the one that had stolen the Truesoul in the first place. Jake wasn't going to feel bad for whatever happened next.

"But it will be your doing," the Lodestar Matron said before sighing. **"Your choice has been made, and it appears that peace is not an option you are willing to explore. Very well... let us adopt a more heavy-handed approach. Apprehend the Chosen."**

With those words, the Lodestar Patron's projection exploded without any warning as a wave of holy light washed over Jake. Once more, it became clear the Holy Church had fully expected things could go south as the explosion from the formation directly attacked Jake's soul, making him stumble back.

Just then, the party of five who had been part of the escort went into action. Two people charged at Jake, two others began manifesting some kind of magic to directly attack

him, and the final one pressed her hands together and offered a prayer as light fell upon her party members.

The attack seemingly arrived in an instant but to Jake...

Slow.

Jake easily dodged the two melee fighters and stepped forward as he grasped one of them by the face. He smashed the guy down into the solid stone floor head-first, forming a crater as cracks formed all throughout the building. They had likely expected him to be stunned by the soul attack, but Jake wasn't that easily affected.

Massive spikes of holy light pierced through the ceiling right then, aiming straight for Jake. Raising a hand, Jake sent out a wave of arcane energy that blew apart the magic easily, and before the mage who had cast it had a chance to muster another response, Jake stepped down and teleported.

With a katar in hand, he was ready to strike, but a familiar warrior wielding a massive shield teleported in and blocked his blow. As he did, Jake very briefly made eye contact with Bertram, feeling a sense of approval from them.

The internal politics of the Holy Church really are well and truly fucked, Jake thought to himself as he Sparta kicked the guardian, sending him flying through a wall and out of the building.

With a quick Pulse, he also confirmed there was movement all around. Dozens of formations were being placed down at once everywhere, and elite parties stormed for the building placed smack in the middle of the city. In the sky, far above, a seal began to form as more than a hundred priests not too far away were channeling some manner of ritual.

Jake saw all this, and yet he took his time to look at the head priest, who had retreated a good distance away. "Are you really going to do this? Throw away your lives for a god who couldn't give two shits if you all died?" For original chapters go to *novel* ♦ *fire* ♦ *net*

"I shall not be swayed by a blasphemer! We are to apprehend you, so if you surrender peacefully, we-"

"You made your choice," Jake cut him off as he lifted his foot and stomped down. A wave of arcane mana erupted from him, the entire town hall building disintegrating as destructive mana washed over it. The shockwave also sent the people close to him scurrying back, giving Jake plenty of space.

The dust didn't even have time to clear as a barrage of arrows flew into the air before splitting apart into a few dozen. All of them curved and flew around the city, with a good number of them targeted at the priests channeling the large ritual in the sky.

A few fighters tried to intercept the arrows aimed at their weaker comrades, but they were blasted away as over fifty explosions rocked the city. Most parties managed to get out of it mostly unharmed and prepared to keep moving, only for them to see hundreds more arrows now blanketing the sky.

With negotiations having fully broken down, Jake saw no reason to hold back anymore as he prepared to make it absolutely clear why they shouldn't have been such fucking idiots but just done the smart thing and surrendered when they had the chance.

"I hope you like the place chosen to be your grave," King Iludar said with confidence, Miranda staring back at him with an expression he couldn't quite read. Not that he had any intentions of really delving into her emotions.

Without any further warning, not wanting to give her or anyone the chance to properly muster a response, he attacked. A staff appeared in his hand as a torrent of bright yellow flames exploded directly toward Miranda, who was currently having her magic suppressed.

She responded by lifting her hand, and... something moved in her sleeves. Before the flames made contact, a large wall appeared between her and King Iludar, much to his shock as his eyes opened wide. His shock only grew in the following moments.

"Tehee, that tickles!" a voice echoed in the minds of all those present as the wall spoke while slightly wiggling back and forth, making the ground shake.

Iludar didn't even have to comprehend what was happening as he heard screams from one section of his elite forces. He briefly glanced over and, to his horror, saw body parts flying into the air, and in the middle, a figure in full metal armor stood as the faint gleam of thin strings of metal could be seen reflecting the sunlight where a bit of blood stuck to them. More than thirty people were killed instantly, but that was only the beginning.

Out of the giant monster, which Iludar recognized as the Chosen of the Boundless Hydra, a single figure appeared. One of those they had been unable to keep proper track of but had simply assumed would remain on the planets she had spent the last long period on.

Someone who'd stayed out of the conflict until now... and someone Iludar had truly wished wouldn't appear.

True Royal.

He didn't even need to think anymore about what to do as the moment she appeared, he knew it was over. While he called himself a king, he knew that in front of a True Royal, he was nothing. She also only displayed her talents, as right when she appeared, her Royal Guards appeared all around her, and alongside many other ectognamorph soldiers, an army flooded the skies.

Iludar didn't hesitate anymore but gave the order in an instant. *"Everyone, full focus on the witch! Kill her and retreat immediately!"*

Despite the situation clearly not being good, not a single elite disobeyed. Thousands erupted with their full power in an instant as they charged forward, magic filling the skies as more elites from Haven also began to exit the giant space worm, with the many insectoid soldiers flying directly into the spells in the air to block them.

King Iludar himself also held nothing back as he fully activated his boosting skill. He infused his staff with far more mana than it could take as he used his best offensive skill above his usual capabilities as a swirling force of intense yellow flames enveloped the entire valley.

In the very next second, a pillar of flames descended upon the witch, but before it even hit, he saw her faintly smile as the environment around her warped and began to turn verdant.

Combined with the giant worm willingly flying up to block the blow, it failed to do much, but Iludar kept channeling the spell as he held his staff with one hand. He realized there was no way to take her down and decided to cut his losses.

Using his other hand, he took out his escape token. With him channeling his magic, his entire body was enveloped in flames, which would disguise as he channeled energy into the token for a few seconds and-

A beam of light pierced through the mass of flames, Iludar feeling a faint pain in his hand. His channeled magic began to dissolve from the shock as he looked down and saw all the fingers beside his thumb missing from the hand that had been holding the token.

At the end-point of the flash of light was an elf... Kindroth... putting out the flames on his clothes as he held the token in his one hand, a bloody dagger in the other one.

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Chapter 1062: Reluctant Choices

Explosions of destructive arcane energy rocked the entire holy city and destroyed hundreds of structures immediately while forcing the fighters from the Holy Church out in the open, killing a few of the weakest ones in the process.

Dozens of attacks arrived at his location, but Jake was too fast and moved close to the ground as he got away. Flying into the air would only make him more of a target, and while he wasn't afraid of the attacks launched by the groups of Holy Church elites, they were still capable of harming him if he decided to just take everything head-on.

Moving quickly, Jake soon teleported to appear close to the many light mages still trying to channel the huge ritual in the sky. On his way, eighteen monk-like fighters appeared as they put their hands together in prayer, a magic circle activating behind each of them.

Together, the circles linked and formed a construct of pure light energy wielding a simple halberd and heavy armor, the entire thing not even having a head. This was one of Jake's first times seeing one of the Holy Church's proper combination formations – albeit a pretty low-level one as he knew the juicy versions could have way more take part- and he gladly met it in battle.

A barrage of arrows exploded upon the golden construct, and to Jake's surprise, it held on and even protected the eighteen people within. Still, Jake quickly identified a weakness and loosed another arrow that penetrated into the construct and through the skull of a monk.

The instant she died, the balance of the formation was thrown off, and every member of it threw up blood and fell to the ground unconscious, also showing Jake the massive downsides of using a formation like this.

Others tried to get in Jake's way, but they were too late as Jake finally disrupted the large ritual in the sky for good. He summoned a barrage of explosive arcane orbs and bombarded the entire area while keeping another large construct of light at bay using his bow.

Even after the ritual in the sky broke apart and faded away, the fervor of the Holy Church fighters didn't diminish in the slightest. Quite the opposite, they seemed to fight even harder than before, and with their sheer numbers and high ratio of healers and other support types, Jake knew this wouldn't be a quick endeavor.

They didn't really have any way to harm Jake either, though. At least nothing that could realistically manage to land. Sure, if he stayed still for a few minutes and allowed them to channel some large ritual, they could definitely do some damage, but what moron would do that?

No, his victory seemed only a matter of time... which made Jake question why Jacob had said he should keep Carmen on standby. The Augur had a solid idea of how strong Jake was, right? But he clearly had his reasons, and Jacob didn't tend to be the type of person to speak empty words.

Releasing a Pulse, Jake noticed that the elites around the head priest and Jacob had regrouped, Bertram also with them. They were clearly up to something, and from the Pulses Jake released, Jacob and the head priest guy were... arguing?

--

"He will die," Jacob said with certainty in his voice as he stood opposite the head priest. "I will not throw a young one with a promising future to his own death like that. His Path has only barely begun, and you're asking me to cut it short before I can give him proper guidance." Read full story at *novel•fire•net*

"It's a monster, nothing more, nothing less. One not tolerated according to the edicts of the Holy Church," the head priest said in between desperately trying to keep track of how the warriors were doing against the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Needless to say, they weren't doing very well.

"A young monster yet to even fully learn who and what it is," Jacob said in a harsh tone. "If given proper time and guidance, I believe--"

"It doesn't matter what you believe!" the head priest yelled, not caring much about showing respect to the Augur anymore. "Unleash it. Now."

"Even if I did agree, unleashing him will cause untold destruction. All our fighters will also be caught in the crossfire even if it proves a success," Jacob continued, unbothered by the priest's attitude. "Also, the honored Lodestar Matron ordered us to apprehend the Chosen, not kill him. We both know that *he* is not someone capable of merely apprehending anything. And, again, this assumes the Malefic One's Chosen doesn't merely slay him."

"It's your pet, if it dies, who cares? And if it wins, it's your job to stop it from killing the Chosen," the head priest shrugged. "Though I don't feel that the higher-ups would be that upset should the Chosen of the Malefic One meet an unfortunate end."

"This will only escalate matters," Jacob sighed.

"Are you done?" the head priest said before finally taking out his trump card. In his hand, a small token flashed into existence as he made eye contact with Jacob. "This is a direct order in accordance with the divine edict bestowed upon me. Release the creature to fight the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Now."

Jacob looked at the man only for a single second more before sighing even louder than before. "Whatever happens next is your sole responsibility. One I doubt you will be able to bear."

The head priest just scoffed as Jacob knelt down and murmured some words as a small ritual circle appeared... and in the middle of it, a small box sat, looking oddly monochrome as if all color had been sucked out of it.

Jake didn't have much time to bother with anyone else as he was busy single-handedly methodically dismantling the entire elite army of the Holy Church. He flew and teleported around from group to group, taking down a few here and there, relying on small hit-and-run attacks.

Was this the most efficient way to go about this situation? No, no not really. But it was a very safe way to do it. Moreover, Jake had yet to truly push himself in any way.

In fact, he hadn't even touched his boosting skill yet and kept away from using any skills that consumed a lot of resources. As mentioned, Jake didn't see a way for the Holy Church to harm him in a fight, but that didn't mean it was impossible for them to ultimately defeat him. They had a lot of healers and other support classes, which resulted in a lot of barriers and skills making Jake's attacks weaker, and whenever he didn't kill someone outright, they would quickly be healed back up, only to attack him shortly after.

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It was a boring and defensive fighting style, but definitely the best after their grand ritual failed. They knew they couldn't win through sheer power, so instead, they aimed to tire him out – a true and tested strategy from the many wars of the multiverse. Even someone like Jake would eventually get tired.

What the Holy Church didn't know was that Jake's resource pools were not exactly ordinary. One could even go as far as to call them anomalous. This resulted in him having far more leeway, but that wasn't to say he couldn't eventually get tired out anyway. And it wasn't just about using resources, as Jake could keep those up with potions or pacing himself for the most part.

Constantly being drained of resources led to a sense of exhaustion not shown on the status sheet. The same was true for mental exhaustion. There were many times Jake had wrung himself dry despite still having plenty of mana and stamina after he had done something incredibly intensive. This exhaustion was also why it didn't work, keeping the same fighters constantly going during big wars by having them repeatedly topped up in resources by support classes. Eventually, they would need proper rest.

Jake was the same. Given enough time and enough bodies thrown at him, his efficiency would fall, and he would weaken until, eventually, he would barely be able to exert his energies. Of course, such a thing didn't happen fast, and as long as Jake held back on using boosting skills, he wasn't pressured for time.

He did have a confession, though. Seeing as this was his first battle after meeting the First Sage and his first time exerting himself after having his soul and Sagacity upgraded, he couldn't help but indulge a little.

That's why he used far more magic than usual and moved around far more than he had to. He was refamiliarizing himself with his body and despite it not being explicitly stated, Jake felt his increased energy control as he moved about.

Jake would liken it to having increased his mind-muscle connection - something he remembered a guy at the gym always talking about being super important. It was as if he was more connected to his own body than usual, and he could feel the energy move more smoothly. It wasn't just limited to his body either. Whenever he exerted control over his immediate area and used mana, he also felt a stronger connection.

Did this make Jake a lot stronger? No, no, it didn't really have any big effect outside of allowing Jake to summon a couple more mana bolts at once without feeling a mental strain. However, it did make Jake feel as if he had a better understanding of what he was doing, and given enough time, this would definitely lead to gains as he would have an easier time improving.

Even now, he subtly improved some things here and there at the expense of the Holy Church fighters. By now, he had killed a few hundred, but he couldn't even tell the difference, in fact, it was as if he only experienced more and more pressure the longer time went on.

He also kept a constant look at Jacob's location, and when he saw him place down a formation, Jake felt a slight tinge of worry from his intuition. This made him change target and shoot a Powershot at his old boss, only to find it blocked by Bertram, who'd slammed his shield down and summoned a large barrier all around the building they had moved to after Jake collapsed the other one.

The adventurer party with the head priest also stayed inside this barrier, with the party putting down some kind of formation for themselves. Jake clearly saw they were up to something, but after a few more attacks on the barrier summoned by Bertram, Jake gave up.

Truthfully, he wasn't confident he could break the barrier made by the Augur's Guardian, at least not without going all-out. Bertram was someone focused entirely on defending Jacob, and he certainly had the skills to do so.

Jake wasn't that upset about it, though... because he kind of wanted to see what they were up to. Besides, he had a lot of other playmates to deal with before whatever the Holy Church was cooking up to face him could manifest.

Iludar merely stared at the elf who stood there with his sole method of escape in hand. He was unable to fully comprehend everything that was going on. All he did know was that Kindroth had betrayed him... which didn't make any sense.

He worked for the Holy Church. Iludar *knew* he worked for the Holy Church. He had been a double agent, feeding them information during the entire war between the Viper and Yip of Yore. True, he hadn't given much useful information, and in retrospect, knowing the Viper had wanted the battle to happen, a lot of what he'd given could even be viewed as him helping out the Primordial, but in some areas, he had definitely harmed Earth.

A thought entered Iludar's head then. Was Kindroth also trying to flee? Did he want to use Iludar's escape token himself? Even if he did so, wouldn't he just be waiting for the Holy Church to one day hunt him down for his betrayal? Even if he didn't flee, he had betrayed the Church now.

There was simply no way the meeting between the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Holy Church would end with a peaceful resolution. Iludar didn't believe that for even a second. That being the case, the bad blood between the Church and Haven would be extreme afterward.

Kindroth would have nowhere to turn. As an agent of the Church, he would be hunted down by the forces of the Malefic One's Chosen, and having seemingly betrayed the Church now... he had nowhere left to turn.

Yet, despite Iludar feeling so certain about his thoughts, Kindroth didn't seem bothered. Instead, he focused powerful light energy in his hand, making the escape token break apart without activating, resulting in neither of them having any way to escape.

The world seemed to almost stand still for Iludar as he considered his choices. All around him, his elite fighters were putting up a valiant struggle, and they were not getting entirely crushed yet, but he knew they didn't stand a chance. The metal mage Iludar only had sparse information on what was going on. An absolute rampage, the True Royal and her army were an unstoppable force, and the witch evidently was far from as suppressed as they'd hoped. All of this not mentioning the army of elite fighters the Chosen of the Boundless Hydra had brought along.

Iludar could fight... but he knew it was meaningless. So, he did the one thing he believed he could do in this situation.

"Disengage from combat, gather at my location... and surrender," he spoke through the psychic link he'd established with every single fighter. At the same time, he threw down his staff and raised his hands as he yelled:

“We surrender!” his voice echoed throughout the valley. He was full of regret, but there truly was no other choice. **“We surrender unconditionally! Everyone, lay down your arms!”**

This was his final hope, and all his loyal followers dutifully followed his command. To his relief, the attackers also stopped when their opponents surrendered and disengaged from combat. He knew many of his soldiers likely had doubts even as they threw down their weapons, but they did so nevertheless.

King Iludar knew when he had lost. He had gambled on the wrong Chosen and the wrong Primordial faction. His own failure in leadership had led to this situation, and while he could blame the evident mental manipulation of Ell'Hakan for having led him down this path, Iludar respected himself enough to take responsibility.

As the fighting stopped, he floated down to the ground and sat down on his knees, hands placed on his lap. The entire battlefield had become eerily silent incredibly quickly as Iludar bowed forward and placed his head on the ground in a bow toward the person he'd come there that day to kill. He knew he was being audacious, but he still spoke.

“I plead with you... please show mercy upon those foolish enough to have followed this sorry excuse for a leader.”

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Chapter 1063: Unwanted Reunion

Jake continued his slaughter, killing hundreds of powerful C-grade fighters. These were individuals who had been branded as elite and were always received respectfully whenever they traveled.

Yet, in front of Jake, they were but lambs to the slaughter. The difference between an elite and someone standing at the pinnacle of their grade was an incomprehensible gap that they simply had no way of crossing, even with all their fancy formations and rituals.

They were also faced with potentially the worst opponent possible. The only way they had a chance to win was to pull off some big ritual or deploy something else Jake wasn't ready to face. It was to take advantage of the large battlefield and the fact Jake had to keep track of so many foes at once.

In front of anyone else, they might have found a few openings, but Jake wasn't that easily surprised. He tracked the entire battlefield at once and was aware of everything happening everywhere. Teleporting around, he perfectly snuffed out anything that even had the slightest potential to become a threat should it be left alone – besides whatever Jacob was doing, that is.

He didn't end up having to wait long, either. Jake saw that within the defensive bubble, the party had laid down some formation which Jake assumed to be for teleporting away. The head priest walked into it, but not before Jake quickly confirmed he had a Mark on him.

Jake had expected the others to follow, but only the regular priests who followed the head priest went through the teleporter. The party, as well as Jacob and Bertram, stayed behind even as the teleportation formation faded away, and from Jake's mark, he felt the head priest had gone to the capital city where Jake had originally arrived on the planet.

With them gone, Jake also noticed the box Jacob was doing some ritual with. He assumed it to be some artifact or something, as he knew the Church loved pulling out one-time artifacts, and he still remembered the Holy Sword Bertram had used on the Monarch of Blood back in the Treasure Hunt, so maybe it was something like that again. However, when he looked at it more closely, the way everything around it appeared slightly distorted was familiar.

He realized what the box was right as Bertram let the party of elites from the Holy Church charge out of the barrier he'd placed down. Jacob and Bertram both stayed as the barrier faded away entirely... and all around them, all color began fading from the world.

For a brief moment, the fighting stopped as Jake teleported to the air and looked down at what was happening. He saw the fading of color spread as the box finally opened... revealing a fragment within that Jake instantly recognized.

Part of the Fallen King, Jake thought, right as a powerful aura exploded onto the scene. Above the fragment, a body began appearing, bones first before flesh grew on in a grotesque scene.

As the creature fully formed, Jake immediately recognized what it was as a subtle sense of danger crept into his mind. Without any hesitation, he activated the device he'd received from Arnold, informing him to send Carmen over. He likely should have done so the moment negotiations had broken down, but better late than never.

He also didn't hesitate to attack. Nocking an arrow, he released a Powershot down toward the creature, hoping to hit it before it could fully form, but Bertram got in the way, taking the hit before getting blasted back through half a dozen buildings and into the plains beyond the city.

Before Jake could even launch another attack... the creature had fully assembled its body. The Desolate Child of Loss had fully regenerated itself and was back.

What had appeared looked different than Jake remembered, though. Rather than looking like a skeleton, barely with any flesh sticking to it, the creature seemed fuller now. It had more flesh than before, with there even being some muscles in there from the looks of it. It was still unhealthily thin, but now it actually looked like a creature that could be alive.

However, compared to its physical growth, the creature hadn't grown that much in levels.

[Desolate Child of Loss – lvl 310]

It had been level 306 when Jake encountered the Desolate Child of Loss the first time, but now it had grown. It was a funny coincidence that for their second meeting, Jake was now the one level 306, the gap having significantly narrowed after all the levels Jake had gotten.

Jake did feel that it had grown stronger, though. Strong enough to register as a threat. He also saw something else that made him frown. Its passive aura of desolation spread out from its body, yet Jacob stood within this aura, completely untouched. It wasn't that he somehow defended himself from the desolation either; he just wasn't affected.

"I'm sorry," Jacob said, his voice low but still loud enough for Jake to hear. From the look on the Augur's face, he seemed legitimately upset, which just perplexed Jake as he had so many questions. Why was the Desolate Child of Loss with Jacob? Why had he seemingly helped it heal?

And why wasn't it attacking him but instead looking at him with confusion.

"Why sorry?" the False God asked, seemingly having not even noticed Jake yet as it only focused on Jacob.

Jacob didn't answer but just looked past the Desolate Child of Loss. The False God took a little before it followed his gaze and saw Jake floating in the air. The moment it laid eyes on Jake, its entire demeanor changed in an instant.

"YOU! Slayer! Enemy!" the creature screeched, its aura exploding outwards as Jacob stumbled back, still unaffected but with a sad look on his face. One that Jake didn't really have much time to study.

The False God didn't hesitate even a moment before it went for the kill. In an instant, it flew into the air, pure desolation spreading everywhere as Jake also reacted by making more distance.

Yet even as he did so, he couldn't escape the domain of desolation passively released by the False God. It had grown even larger than before, and if Jake wanted to fight, he was pretty much forced to remain inside of it.

I can't hold back too much anymore, Jake also told himself as he made the tough decision of activating Arcane Awakening at the safe 30% boost, increasing his consumption of resources directly but not straining himself too much. The boost was needed, too, as the Desolate Child of Loss was effectively constantly in its fully powered state.

With his bow in hand, Jake attacked the Desolate Child of Loss as the creature took out a simplistic spear of bone. Scales also immediately covered his body to fight off the desolation as Jake attacked.

His arrow tore through the desolation, losing energy during flight, but it should be powerful enough. The last time Jake fought the creature, it barely reacted to any attacks or defended itself. However, this time around, it did one better and actively dodged Jake's arrow.

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It's smarter? Jake questioned internally, feeling like this was going to get really annoying. However, he was far from deterred. Even if the Desolate Child of Loss had grown in both power and ability, Jake also wasn't the same as he had been during their last encounter. He was stronger now, but what's more, he wasn't suffering from a desolation-caused soul injury.

Following up his prior attack, Jake released another arrow, but this time around, it curved slightly in the middle of its flight, much to the surprise of the Desolate Child of Loss, who, while having certainly grown smarter, was still not a talented fighter.

The arrow struck the False God in the shoulder and made the creature tumble slightly while in mid-flight, giving Jake's follow-up attacks a chance to land. It wasn't just a single follow-up arrow either, as Jake activated his newly gained Timeless Focus of the Apex Hunter and rapidly shot out half a dozen arrows that struck the Desolate Child of Loss one after another in quick succession, sending it spinning toward the ground as Jake just kept shooting even after the rapid-fire effect ended. Again, he had to pace himself as he knew the False God was not something easily harmed, much less killed.

However, despite Jake feeling confident, he had kind of neglected one thing... the pure fanaticism of the Holy Church. A logical person would retreat away from the False God with power matching a Unique Lifeform that was constantly releasing a field of death, but the Holy Church members had never been logical.

All the healers and other support classes defended themselves and others from the desolation as they joined the Desolate Child of Loss in their assault. What's more, Jake noticed that the effect of the desolation wasn't as strong on these members of the Holy Church, which once more made him theorize that the False God was actively trying to avoid attacking them.

Not affecting Jacob could have been a fluke, but combined with the Desolate Child of Loss' increased intelligence and the fact these Holy Church members were also experiencing a lesser effect, Jake could only conclude one thing:

The Desolate Child of Loss was learning to control its power over desolation. If it learned to fully control desolation and perhaps even gained full Authority... combined with its passive domain... yeah, that could get really bad, really fast.

Luckily, the False God evidently wasn't there yet as all it did was scream loudly as all the rubble around it disintegrated when it stood back up. Once more, the creature shot into the air, but this time, Jake didn't have leeway to outright attack it because he also had to deal with the remaining Holy Church members who attacked him.

From their attacks, Jake also confirmed the creature's control over the desolation domain remained severely limited as the spells flying toward him were significantly weakened by the desolation. Not as much as Jake would have liked, but from the magic deployed by the priests, he began to suspect holy magic was quite effective against desolation.

What it wasn't very effective against was destructive arcane mana as Jake blanketed the sky in explosions to give himself space and time to keep the Desolate Child of Loss at bay. He wanted to avoid an outright melee with it, as the closer he got, the stronger the desolation grew, and so far, the False God hadn't shown any ranged attacks of note yet.

The members of the Holy Church clearly noticed Jake's strategy and moved to work against him. Powerful barriers began impeding his path, slowing him down and allowing the False God to get closer, and a few of his arrows aimed at the creature were even body-blocked by Holy Church members willing to risk – or at times outright giving – their lives just to inconvenience Jake. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel•fire•net*

Annoyingly, their strategy worked as soon Jake was forced to come face to face with the Desolate Child of Loss. It sped up when it got moderately close, appearing right in front of him with its simplistic spear.

Jake responded by pulling out Eternal Hunger while using the other hand to cast arcane magic. He dodged and deflected the spear of the Desolate Child of Loss a few times, finding himself roughly equally matched in both power and speed.

This clearly didn't sit well with the Desolate Child of Loss as it once more screamed in anger. Its aura exploded as it did so, the pressure from the desolation domain growing in intensity and bearing down on Jake as the False God grew even faster and stronger before, almost as if its anger was fueling its power.

He still wasn't entirely clear why the Desolate Child of Loss was this angry at him, but quite frankly, he didn't care to find out as Jake responded by also getting a bit more serious himself. Activating Pride of the Malefic Viper, his immediate surroundings suddenly began to show faint signs of dark green and the purple gleam of Jake's arcane affinity as he reclaimed the domain as his own.

The mana consumption from Pride proved quite immense, but Jake had a massive pool able to tide him over for now as he pressed forward. The Desolate Child of Loss was surprised at Jake partly freeing himself from the domain, making the creature unable to respond as Jake cut it several times across the chest before stabbing it in the neck.

A pulse of arcane energy flooded through Eternal Hunger and exploded the weapon, sending the False God flying back with its head nearly entirely cut off, but as expected, this barely slowed down the creature as it rapidly regenerated. Still, it was a minor victory, instantly made not that sweet as Jake got hit by a blast of light magic in the side, singeing a few of his scales off.

Stabilizing, Jake wisely used this regeneration time to once more create distance while also addressing some of the more annoying Holy Church members. He was targeting the barrier casters first and foremost, which did prove rather tricky as his opponents had clearly expected this to be Jake's response.

He managed to kill a few dozen Holy Church members before the Desolate Child of Loss was upon him once more. He switched to half-melee again as he kept casting magic and dodging his attackers, finding the entire situation rather tricky, if still manageable for now... that "for now" proving to indeed be a very short-lived statement.

The elite party of five that had been with the head priest suddenly appeared, having teleported behind Jake after preparing who-knows-what somewhere else on the battlefield. Jake had neglected them, which proved to be a mistake as they now seemed quite different from before.

All five of them were enveloped in holy light, forming a powerful construct that far surpassed any of the ones Jake had faced prior. This construct looked a bit like the halberd-wielding ones from before, but this one had a head and far more intricate armor. What's more, it was clearly far more powerful. While the holy light made it a bit hard to see, Jake did notice how all five now wore the exact same armor and visible pendant, making him guess they were using items to fully sustain and unleash this skill.

The person in the middle was seemingly capable of controlling the construct, which also proved a boon, as the warrior charged straight at Jake, leaving him with a False God in the front and a super-construct attacking from the back.

Gritting his teeth, Jake knew he had to take things up a notch as he pushed his boosting skill further than before, pushing his body and now truly putting him on a timer. Blocking the Desolate Child of Loss using his katar, Jake faced the construct as he tried to block it using a set of arcane barriers but found himself sorely lacking.

The halberd sliced through all his barriers, and while Jake did dodge taking a major hit, first blood was still drawn as he received a nasty cut on his chest. Before he had any time to rest, the construct attacked again, and combined with several ranged attacks from all directions along with an angry Desolate Child of Loss, Jake found himself under pressure.

It was mainly the construct that took him by surprise. Jake tried to block it a few more times but found it far stronger than it had any right to be. It didn't make any sense... at least not until Jake saw the state of the party who were using it.

Suicidal fucking bastards, Jake cursed internally as he noticed how golden veins were forming all over the elite party's bodies, the armor they wore having seemingly merged with their skin. They were using the fucked up Martyr magic of the Holy Church, much to Jake's annoyance.

Still, he continued holding on as he was repeatedly pushed back while trying to focus on buying time and taking down the many Holy Church elites to give himself some more space. Over a dozen lesser constructs had also taken to the air by now, and while individually they weren't that dangerous, combined with everything, it was a struggle.

Not to say Jake was on the losing end quite yet. With Pride and his boosting skill pushed further, Jake managed to consistently avoid taking damage while dealing plenty to his enemies, primarily through destructive arcane magic or the occasional arrow taking down an opponent in one shot.

Things were tricky, though, and Jake found himself in dangerous situations more than he would have liked. He sought further and further up in the sky to give himself more space to dodge, and staying constantly on the move allowed him to stay away from some of the many constructs chasing him.

The elite party construct kept up, though, and so did the Desolate Child as he battled those two primarily. As they got further and further up, they encountered a few wayward monsters and natural phenomena, such as thunderstorms and whatnot, which was perhaps why no one took notice of the approaching blip far above them that was rapidly growing in size.

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Chapter 1064: Carmen Used Runemaiden! It's Super Effective!

Jake braced himself as he prepared for the arrival of something that would definitely change the balance of the battle. He was attacked from all sides but still went on the offensive as he clashed with the Desolate Child of Loss in melee.

His Katar met the spear of desolation-infused bone, the katar winning out, but Jake still didn't come out of it entirely unscathed as the creature released a shockwave of pure desolation that managed to partly penetrate his scales and into his body. He endured the unpleasant sensation as he successfully stabbed the creature in the stomach before exploding the weapon, forcing the False God away from himself.

Right on time, too.

A faint smile appeared on his lips right as the Desolate Child of Loss also noticed something was up. It looked up for a brief moment right before it was struck by what many would likely assume to be a meteorite.

With Jake's extremely high Perception, he clearly saw what happened next. A Runemaiden, enveloped in flames created from having forcefully descended incredibly quickly and breaking through the atmosphere, smashed into the False God while clumsily landing a clothesline as she and the Desolate Child of Loss crashed toward the ground at truly meteoric speed.

The two of them smashing into each other released a shockwave of pure physical force that washed over Jake and even made some Holy Church members stumble, but it was nothing compared to the true touchdown. The wanna-be city was torn asunder as a crater formed right in the middle of it, destroying the majority of the many structures while creating large fissures that made what remained tumble and fall inwards toward the center of the crater.

In the middle of said crater, Jake saw a familiar figure rising as the Desolate Child of Loss was firmly embedded in the ground, a large indent in its mid-section from Carmen's greeting. However, that wasn't the most shocking thing.

In a world of monochrome black and white, Carmen remained entirely untouched as her blonde hair and glowing golden runes across her body created quite the sight.

Jake would have loved to keep a close watch of what happened next, but he had other eggs to crack as he smiled and looked toward the Holy Church members who needed a moment to understand what had just happened. A moment that Jake gladly cut short as he went on the offensive, this time no longer limited by having a False God up in his face, weakening him with desolation all the time.

Truthfully, he still had some doubts if Carmen could truly handle the Desolate Child of Loss. She was strong, yes, but the False God was no simple opponent. It was a being that had defeated Sylphie and the Fallen King, and while he had been told Carmen was suited to face it, Jake remained skeptical. He did know how durable she was from all their spars, and based on how she looked like a golden lighthouse in a sea of desolation, he reckoned she was able to counter it at least somewhat.

Hopefully, no matter what, she would at least be able to hold on until Jake got done cleaning house – or Church in this instance - after which he would come to her assistance... at least, those were his thoughts. His misguided, poor, if well-intentioned, thoughts...

Carmen felt pretty damn hot standing over the Desolate Child of Loss.

No, not hot like that, in the literal sense. She had just been on fire a few seconds earlier, having brutishly broken through all the layers of the sky by force and set herself ablaze in the process. Still, she had gone a lot faster than she thought she could, and what's more, with an assist from Jake even hit a pretty damn solid opening strike on the feared False God she was only now fully realizing she was there to fight.

Now it made a lot more sense why the Augur had said she should be there, though.

The desolation was all around her as she stood there, and she felt it in the environment as her body responded, making the runes light up all over her body. Looking down, she saw that despite the awesomeness of Carmen's initial opening attack, the creature quickly reacted as it screamed and lunged up toward her, trying to grab her feet and inflict its desolation.

Carmen responded by stomping it on the chest, deeping the crater further in the process. Before she could stomp a second time, a wave of desolation turned all the gray stone around them into dust while allowing the creature to free itself.

A spear-like bone appeared in its hand as Carmen gladly sprung forward to meet the creature in melee. Rather than dodge, she directly struck the spear head-on, the entire thing crumbling before her fist the moment it made contact with her as a faint golden pulse echoed through her arm.

The creature looked confused as Carmen proceeded to punch it in the face, releasing a second golden echo, sending it spinning before she followed up with a kick, launching the creature away from the city before giving chase.

She wanted the thing out of the city and away from Jake and all the others, as that would definitely help Jake more than the Church due to the effectiveness of the Holy affinity against desolation.

Carmen already knew of the Desolate Child of Loss from the briefings of what had happened with the Fallen King, and as they had always considered it a possibility the creature was still alive, Carmen had wanted to know what she was dealing with if she ever encountered it.

The Fallen King hadn't been someone she was close to, but the fact other people she cared about had been was enough to make her feel like this fight was personal. There had been some doubt, though. Knowing the False God had defeated not only the Unique Lifeform and Sylphie, as well as having pushed Jake and everyone else incredibly far when they came to try and save the two, she had wondered what she could even do.

That was until she learned what the False God truly was. When she later performed a ritual to contact her Patron, her worry was lessened even further, as in the words of Valdemar:

"You're a Runemaiden! My Runemaiden! Just ignore that desolation stuff and punch it!"

Truly words of wisdom that Carmen would gladly live by.

Catching up to the False God in mid-air, Carmen engaged it in melee once more as she continued to push them further and further away from the city into the wide-open plains surrounding it. Once the domain of desolation no longer affected Jake and the Holy Church, Carmen caught a quite frankly horribly performed punch before throwing the Desolate Child of Loss over her shoulder and down toward the ground.

Giving chase, she tried to land a knee in the creature's face, but the False God managed to get out of the way as it screamed again, a massive wave of desolation washing over her.

"Yeah, yeah," she said carefree, diving straight through the wave before punching the creature in the stomach and elbowing it in the chin, sending it slightly airborne, only for her to catch its ankle and smash it into the ground face-first.

Twisting out of her grip, the Desolate Child of Loss jumped at her again, but Carmen easily dodged its attacks before landing several of her own. Every single punch sent shockwaves through the creature's body, and it was clearly confused about what was happening.

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It tried to attack with another torrent of desolation that could instantly kill even some peak C-grades, but Carmen merely blocked it with her arms crossed in front of her face before pushing through and landing another powerful blow that sent the creature stumbling.

In a swift move, it managed to take Carmen slightly by surprise as it dove forward and put its sickly-looking hands on Carmen as they began to somehow turn even grayer. She remembered the reports of how deadly its touch was and how physical contact should be avoided... none of which applied to her. She gladly grabbed the hands on her and pulled the creature toward her before giving it a good headbutt, sending the False God away with a fractured skull before giving it a solid kick in the stomach, bending it over as something definite broke.

Annoyingly so, when she tried to continue her assault, the ground broke apart under her feet as she tried to shoot forward, the soil having become too brittle from the desolation, resulting in the Desolate Child of Loss doing something neither she nor Jake had ever seen it do before – it retreated to make distance.

Not just a small dodge-away before it would reengage, but it actually flew backward while throwing one of its bone spears. Carmen dodged the first one, but five more appeared right after, coming at her too fast for her to dodge as while she could handle the desolation, the environment remained affected, making them fly far faster than ordinary. Clicking her tongue, she took the hit and was blasted back, unharmed from the attack but with more distance between them again.

As a response, Carmen knelt down and placed two fists on the ground. **“Sacred Battlefield.”** For more chapters visit movel**fire**.net

A pulse of golden light enveloped the entire area, creating an arena as she used a follow-up skill that combined with Sacred Battlefield. One of her newer additions that was perfect for a situation like this.

“Divine Bloodrune Seal.”

Connecting with the blood that made her a Runemaiden of Valdemar in the first place, a divine seal was placed upon the battlefield and all those within it. On her own forehead, a golden rune began glowing, and simultaneously, an identical golden rune marked the forehead of the Desolate Child of Loss. For a second, it even penetrated the desolation before the rune faded away, no longer visible but definitely still there.

From the looks of it, the False God didn't even notice at first, but it definitely noticed the effects of the Divine Blood Seal as it continued trying to fly away. Its speed reduced significantly the closer it got to the edge of the battlefield and away from Carmen, and at the same time, when the Runemaiden shot forward in pursuit, her speed was far faster than before.

The Divine Bloodrune Seal had a few different effects, but in this context, it was done to ensure the Desolate Child of Loss was kept within the Sacred Battlefield. The rune worked not only on the False God, though, but also on Carmen herself.

Both of them would be slowed down if they tried to leave the Sacred Battlefield with the slowdown increasing progressively until they would be entirely unable to move right at the edge. At the same time, advancing toward an opponent within the Sacred Battlefield would allow either of them to experience a speed boost.

The entire purpose of this combo of skills was to force a confrontation, and it definitely did its job as the Desolate Child of Loss was soon caught up with again and forced into another melee scuffle it definitely didn't enjoy. Once they were this close to each other, the Divine Bloodrune Seal didn't have any effect, but if either party should try to run, it would reactivate.

With no escape, the Desolate Child of Loss tried to fight the best it could, but Carmen was once more superior as she dodged or blocked all attacks while pummeling the False God repeatedly, continuing to weaken it. After several dozen powerful blows, the Desolate Child of Loss was sent stumbling back, its body trying to regenerate from the continuous damage.

"Why!?" the creature screamed, with Carmen not even sure what it was asking about.

"Bad matchup, pal," Carmen responded, just assuming the creature questioned why it was getting absolutely dominated.

In its defense... Carmen was perhaps the absolutely worst foe it could face in all of C-grade. She was a Runemaiden, after all, and one made using the blood of a Primordial, making her innate abilities as powerful as could be.

Runemaids were elite pugilist fighters of Valhal. Their entire bodies were turned into living weapons, but in return, they had to give up some things. Carmen no longer had mana, and while she could painstakingly still transform stamina into mana should the need arise, doing so would also leave her weakened and temporarily disable some of her passive skills. This mana also couldn't leave her body but could instead only, at most, be infused into items through physical touch.

Oh, but she couldn't use weapons, either. Not even if she wanted to. Equipment was also severely limited for her, as, in many ways, her body was her equipment. That part didn't bother her, though, as Carmen wouldn't be able to find armor more durable than her own body, and it would definitely have worse self-repair functionality.

Still, all these limitations resulted in Carmen and other Runemaids having few options when it came to combat outside of just charging at people and punching them. Which was a-okay with Carmen as that was how she preferred to fight. It was a big weakness, though... but Valhal had found ways to alleviate this. And all came down to their name:

Runemaids.

The runes covering Carmen's body weren't just for show but served to increase her defenses against what she otherwise couldn't defend against. While it was true her physical resilience was through the roof, these runes barely had any impact on that, as it was simply her skin being like steel. Instead, they were there nearly solely to counter all forms of magical effects on the Runemaiden.

Magic was the biggest weakness of most melee-focused warriors, and certain schools fucked them up more than others. Carmen, as someone who was purely physical, naturally had incredibly low Willpower, which made her weak against soul attacks and anything affecting her mind, but the runes entirely removed that weakness. There were exceptions, of course, such as Jake's weird eye-skill still having some effect on Carmen, but even that was weakened.

To call her borderline immune to magic really was no understatement, though it naturally had its limits if it was forced to nullify too much and too potent magic at once. However, in most cases, the runes sealed the very concept of magic affecting the Runemaiden. Buffs from other people didn't work on her, most of her boosting skills had no effect either, and as mentioned, she couldn't use many auxiliary items, at least not without a lot of effort.

Her skill choices were also limited, and she had more passive than active skills by a large margin. What's more, she was locked into her Path as the Runemaiden Ritual was a permanent change. Anything from now on would be a variant of it.

These things did seem bad, but overall, it was definitely fucking worth it in Carmen's mind, and she had no regrets. To be the bane of all magic users in C-grade was bloody awesome, and against the Desolate Child of Loss that didn't have anything besides its concept of desolation, she was like the False God's natural predator.

The False God wasn't truly that strong or fast. It only appeared like it was because it weakened everything and everyone that ever came close to it while breaking down the concepts in its environment, making it experience less resistance during any actions it took. Even the attacks that hit the Desolate Child of Loss were heavily nullified by desolation whenever they entered its body, and this was also the case for Carmen, though the golden pulses she released with every punch did do solid damage still.

She wouldn't really classify them weakening as that big of a problem anyway. It just meant she would have to punch the Desolate Child of Loss for a lot longer before it weakened enough. Usually, giving an opponent time was problematic, but the False God simply wasn't smart enough to even think up a way to escape or change the tide of battle.

Instead, it did dumb shit like trying to get rid of the Divine Bloodseal Rune by focusing its desolation on that rather than trying to target the far larger and more fragile Sacred

Battlefield. Even now, the skill was passively weakening, and if the Desolate Child of Loss focused on getting rid of it, the False God would at least have a shot at escape. Alas, its stupidity only gave Carmen more time as the battle stretched on.

Her constant assault only picked up speed as more of her passive skills came into greater effect the more the battle dragged on, and she kept destroying the Desolate Child of Loss and depleting its energy, but it certainly wasn't fast.

Also, while Carmen wasn't afraid of a drawn-out battle, she did have a limit. The runes that lit up on her body offered a massive resistance, but it was only with active infusion she was able to entirely nullify the desolation. Should she run out of stamina and thus be unable to keep the runes going, things could get hairy, but honestly, as she broke the Desolate Child of Loss apart by breaking its spine and crushing its skull for the twelfth time, she got the feeling she would be the winner in this battle of endurance.

In fact, she was more worried about how Jake was keeping up with everything, as truthfully, from the brief glimpse she got of the Holy Church forces, he definitely had the tougher challenge to deal with.

That was only from her perspective, though, and Jake likely wouldn't concur. Who knows, maybe he would even be done fast enough to come and see when it was time to put an end to the Desolate Child of Loss once and for all.

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Chapter 1065: No Mercy

The Powershot pierced through the holy construct and struck one of the people within, blowing a hole through their chest and destroying the special armor the holy warrior had been wearing.

Despite this massive hole, the person remained alive, though he barely looked human anymore. Veins of glowing light marred his entire body, burning his life away from within, and the attack he'd just received only sped up his demise further.

Still, Jake couldn't help but click his tongue as the super construct still hadn't fallen yet despite how much he'd attacked it and how beaten and battered the people inside it were. All around him were corpses – few of them whole – of the Holy Church elite fighters who'd continued fighting even after the Desolate Child of Loss was pushed away by Carmen.

Without the desolation weakening Jake, he had gone on a rampage. As he'd also pushed his boosting skill to keep up with the False God, he saw no reason to ramp down but kept it up to fuel his slaughter.

Jake was also done experimenting and only went for the kill, showing no mercy to anyone. This had resulted in there now only being a bit over a dozen alive in the ruins of the city, with the only five still able to fight the elite party in their super construct wearing their Holy Armaments.

The five of them had proven the most durable by far, but in the end, they, too, would fall. With no other targets, Jake bombarded the construct continuously, blasting it away and into the ground as he deepened the crater created by Carmen further. The final warriors of the Holy Church tried to hold on for as long as possible, but Jake didn't let up until the construct shattered and broke apart.

As it did, the five people who'd been part of it all lit up as their bodies exploded, releasing a massive shockwave of golden light that forced Jake to summon a protective barrier to ward it off. At that moment, he felt pretty good about being a ranged fighter, as the explosion had been extremely intense, but he also couldn't help but be annoyed.

He despised the mere concept of those Martyr rituals and spells the Holy Church often made use of. It felt almost like adding insult to injury that it even made the people using the Holy Armaments blow up once their bodies couldn't hold on anymore, destroying everything around them, including the armor.

Holy Church members probably didn't care, though. The only reason they even did something so extreme in the first place was because of their free trip to the Holyland upon death for them to live out the rest of their soul's lifespan doing... something. This Holyland still sounded incredibly boring to Jake, but it clearly appealed to a lot of people.

Anyway, the holy explosion from the five of them blowing themselves up had killed four of their comrades who had been lying in the ruins below, incapacitated but still alive. There were eleven more, and Jake showed no mercy as he raised a hand and conjured spikes of stable arcane mana that promptly shot down and finished them off, leaving only Jake alive in what had once been a massive city. Or, well, at least something built to look like a city.

He wasn't entirely alone, though. Two others still lived and observed him from nearby. Jacob and Bertram stood far outside the city, having just looked on as Jake had performed his slaughter. In fact, after Jacob had summoned, revived, conjured, or whatever the hell he had done to make the Desolate Child of Loss appear, the two of them had quietly disengaged from everything.

Jake didn't miss this, as he'd kept an eye on Bertram primarily while fighting the super construct and the Desolate Child of Loss. Bertram was definitely a huge threat if he also

had some Holy Armament to attack with, but he hadn't taken part at all. In fact, he looked pretty damn satisfied seeing all those people killed.

Things were well and truly rotten in the Holy Church, and Jake was going to get to the bottom of what the fuck was going on... but no matter the explanation, after everything, he was determined.

The Holy Church had refused to surrender in a situation they knew they couldn't win, even throwing away so many lives. They had apparently found and were making use of the Desolate Child of Loss, a creature that had destroyed several planets in the galaxy and likely had a kill count that put Jake's to shame.

So many fucked up choices had been made, and honestly, Jake was done. He had removed them from Earth, but now it appeared he would have to purge them from the entire galaxy. As for those who resisted and refused...

Well, they would end up like the ruined city behind him.

Miranda stood side by side with Lillian as they observed the surrendered monarch. King Iludar, the final holdout among the Ell'Hakan loyalists knelt on the ground, his staff tossed to the side and his aura entirely dispelled from his body. He had also purposefully released his energy, making his body weak and fragile to truly show he had given up all thoughts of fighting.

His loyal soldiers followed suit and also surrendered, and if Miranda was being honest, this action kind of troubled her. It made things messier, as she didn't feel good about breaking old-world international laws by killing prisoners of war. Still, she would have to find a solution.

William soon also joined her, the ground in the direction he came from covered in blood and body parts as the metal mage had cut up everything around him using his metal wire weapon after sneaking into the enemy forces.

Meanwhile, Vesperia floated above, keeping a close eye on the surrendered king, looking down at him with pure disdain. Her being there added quite the intimidating presence, helped along by the army of insects surrounding the mountain valley.

As for a certain cosmic worm...

"Over already? That was super boring... but I'm still getting paid, right?" Sandy asked with a hint of worry in their voice.

"Of course you are. Thank you for the help, Chosen of the Lord Protector," Miranda responded telepathically, remembering to show proper respect despite the worm clearly not caring about any such thing as courtesy and respect wasn't edible.

“Yay!” the cosmic worm said before promptly shrinking down again and flying down to land on a rock. *“Poke me when we go back...”*

Miranda gave a quick mental confirmation as she turned her attention to the surrendered forces at last.

King Iludar looked back at her, a certain listlessness in his eyes. She couldn't help but consider if he could be useful, though. He was moderately powerful in his own right, and his leadership skills were evident based on the loyalty of the elite soldiers who followed him, not to mention how he had effectively been Ell'Hakan's second-in-command.

However, needless to say, there was a bit of a trust issue. Speaking of trust issues, it was also soon time to address a certain elf who was standing a bit by himself, not quite walking over to Miranda and the others, but also not staying near Iludar.

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Let's just deal with the self-proclaimed king first, she thought, sighing internally.

“I accept your surrender, but let me ask... what do you expect to happen now?” Miranda just asked straight up. In the multiverse, there were some customs and norms when it came to dealing with prisoners of war, none of which Miranda found very appealing.

The most popular one was to not take prisoners in the first place, primarily because most wars happened between factions that absolutely hated each other. Another very popular method was to momentarily seal them away and pretty much imprison them, with the goal of doing either a prisoner exchange or selling the prisoners back to the force they originally came from. Something that was not an option in this case as said faction no longer existed.

A third method was one Miranda didn't even consider, but slavery was one of the only ways to make use of a prisoner while making sure they were “trustworthy.” In most cases, prisoners of war were used as meat shield soldiers or sold off, but again, not an option on Earth.

Next was one Miranda would regularly consider first: exile. The problem here was, where could these people be exiled to? Anywhere in the Milky Way was out of the question, so would they have to keep them imprisoned until the universe opened up and then send them where exactly? They had no allies but only a shitload of enemies no matter where they went.

So, that left what option exactly? Just simple imprisonment? Doing so was possible, but it was also outrageously expensive, and to what end would they imprison them? For how long? A C-grade could easily live for thousands of years. Miranda was also under no illusion that throwing someone who was once known as a king in jail for a few

centuries would lead to reformation that would turn Iludar into a fully rehabilitated citizen and trusted ally.

That's why she outright asked Iludar what he expected them to do. Because she genuinely had no clue.

"I... I do not know," Iludar spoke in a somber tone, also not helping to find a solution. "All I can do is ask that you spare those who followed this fool. If my death can give them a chance to recompense, I would gladly offer my life."

The man had a dignified expression as he spoke those words as if he had resigned himself to his fate. His loyal soldiers all looked at him with regret, and a few even looked like they wanted to speak up, but they all stopped themselves before they did so. Miranda had to admit she did find Iludar's actions commen-

"Yeah, that's bullshit," Kindroth chimed in, shaking his head.

"That was definitely all deceitful," William concurred, Miranda staring at the metal mage as she put quite a bit more stock in his words due to his karmic magic.

"What do you mea-" Iludar began as Kindroth cut him off. The most update novels are published on novel~fire~net

"A minute ago, I barely managed to interrupt you from activating an escape token, and from the looks of it, that token definitely wasn't of the mass-escape variety. You were trying to run on your own like the coward you are, leaving everyone else to die," Kindroth said in a calm yet harsh tone.

"I believed that should I leave the battlefield on my own, it would increase the chances of you sparing my-"

"Deceitful again," William gave Kindroth an assist as the young metal mage looked at Miranda. "He definitely just made up that excuse on the spot."

Miranda wasn't pleased. She had just begun to feel that if Iludar was so honorable, there maybe was a chance to make some kind of deal work, but now her face had turned cold. The man in question also noticed this as he still tried to weasel his way out.

"You all misunderstand... what I wanted was to-"

"To make Miranda think that maybe you weren't all that bad, which would make her consider sparing your life. Because, hey, what feels worse than killing someone who's already given up and begging for you to kill him to make up for his sins? That just makes your execution feel weird," Kindroth shook his head as he went over and looked down on Iludar.

“That’s why I called you a coward, by the way. You desperately do everything you can, no matter what, to survive. Do you know why Ell’Hakan never bothered to manipulate you much? Because he didn’t need to. He could feel your fear. You’re the kind of person who will kneel and act like a dog in front of anyone stronger while acting arrogant and noble when in the company of those weaker than yourself. To keep you on a leash, all Ell’Hakan had to do was remain stronger than you. I was honestly surprised you didn’t come crawling to the Malefic Viper’s Chosen the second he killed Ell’Hakan, but you’re probably smart enough to at least understand that wouldn’t have ended well for yourself. That’s why you wanted to instead align yourself with the biggest – and, in your view, strongest – faction in the multiverse. Because you always need to hug the knees of someone or something else.”

Kindroth turned and looked at Miranda. “Don’t get me wrong, he would definitely be loyal to Jake should you choose to adopt him, but be fully aware that the second someone comes around he believes is stronger, he’ll instantly betray you and run to them like the disloyal dog he is.”

Iludar stared at Kindroth as his facial expression slowly changed. “Says you. Aren’t you also not just siding with whatever faction you think is winning, playing all sides at once?”

“It’s complicated, but I guess there’s no harm in telling you now,” Kindroth shrugged, looking to Miranda for a moment before going back to Iludar, the explanation that followed more for Miranda than the former king. “As you said, I am indeed allied with the Holy Church. I’m not part of the Holy Church, mind you, and neither is my planet, but my Patron is certainly considered a close ally. Let me be clear, never once have my loyalties shifted; you just didn’t know who I was loyal to or what my goal was. Though, to be fair, for the longest time, I didn’t know what my goal was either, I was just following instructions and a plan laid by my Patron, with a certain level of personal flair and interpretation mixed in.”

“But you worked with Ell’Hakan. You spied on Haven for us and gave us actionable intel,” Iludar said, not as much trying to understand the situation as he wanted to also get Kindroth in trouble.

“Yeah, as I said, complicated,” Kindroth sighed. “It needed to look real and Ell’Hakan needed to be winning the conflict. At least, that’s how I came to understand why my Patron wanted me to do what I did. I was never on Ell’Hakan’s side but always working for my Patron, who in turn worked with the Holy Church... and the Holy Church expected an outcome that included the death of Yip of Yore and Ell’Hakan. Which is where I come in.”

“The Holy Church had an agreement with the Celestial Child,” Iludar continued, now looking a bit perplexed. “Are you saying they broke it, or-“

“That manipulative fuck didn’t have an agreement with the Holy Church. He had an agreement with a certain subset of the Holy Church who wanted his Bloodline. Perhaps

the confusion is also partly my fault, as I should also speak more clearly,” Kindroth said, shaking his head. “I guess it would be more accurate to say that my Patron worked with the Holy Mother over the Holy Church and that I worked for the Augur primarily.”

Miranda couldn't help but look at Kindroth with a frown as he said this. She knew some things about him, and she'd known he had been a double or triple or whatever agent playing pretty much all sides, but he had never so directly stated he'd worked for the Augur before.

“The Augur is part of the Holy Church,” Iludar said. “A high-ranking member of it.”

“Yeah, it hasn't really felt that way during this entire thing,” Kindroth sighed. “The internal politics of the Holy Church are a fucking mess, and I'm glad not to officially be a part of it. Just know that some parts expected Ell'Hakan to die and would prefer for his Bloodline to die with him, and another part really wants that Bloodline.”

“And I assume you're in the part that wants it gone?” Miranda spoke up for the first time in a while.

“Exactly. So is the Augur,” Kindroth answered. “I do apologize for not explaining things fully yet, but as I said, things are pretty damn complicated.”

“I knew enough to the extent that what I didn't know caused us no harm,” Miranda answered in a forgiving tone. “I will need a long talk with you later, though. You say it's complicated, but do humor me anyway.”

“Alright, that was the plan anyway,” Kindroth smiled as he looked at Iludar. “Should I also be kneeling in surrender?”

“We'll find out later if that's needed,” Miranda said, not joking at all, before she looked over at Iludar and smiled.

“I want to honor your request from earlier. We shall give your loyal soldiers a chance to recompense.”

Iludar looked relieved before switching to confusion until he landed on realization. He tried to mobilize the energy in his body again, but it was far too late. The ground below him had already turned into a murky green swamp as several arms shot up and grabbed him before pulling him under, never to be seen again.

Miranda did have to thank him for that brilliant offer of giving his life for his soldiers, though. It had helped make her decision of how to proceed a lot easier.

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Chapter 1066: An Unfortunate Child

Jake still wasn't entirely sure how to approach Jacob and Bertram, who seemingly just stood there waiting for him, but he knew he wanted answers, one way or another.

Flying over, he landed not far from the two of them, and Bertram didn't even try to stand in front or be defensive. Not that he needed to, as Jake had no thoughts of attacking, at least not if he wasn't forced into it.

"So, I'll need a really good explanation," Jake said, not much friendliness in his voice.

"And I'll give one," the Augur nodded with a sigh. "Nothing that happened here played out the way I would have preferred it to, and I can't even say the outcome was unpredictable."

"I would say quite a few unpredictable things happened," Jake said. "Such as, oh, I don't know, the sudden reappearance of a False God?"

"Yes... everything related to the Desolate Child of Loss is just tragic," the Augur said with regret in his voice. "I was drawn to him when he barely survived the clash with the Unique Lifeform and-

"Fallen King," Jake cut the Augur off. "Someone who died protecting the rest of us from that living calamity. A living calamity you apparently decided to scoop up and help by not only healing it but even making it stronger. So, let's start there. Why the fuck was the Desolate Child of Loss in your possession?"

"Alright, but as I said, it isn't simple, and there are two primary reasons. First of all, I was told to try and make the Desolate Child of Loss into an ally. You weren't the first one who became aware of the creature. The Holy Church had sacrificed people before to know more about what they were dealing with and ultimately decided they wanted to try and use the False God if possible. But to be clear, they don't view the Desolate Child of Loss as an actual creature but just a tool," Jacob began. "That leads to my second reason. I'm an Augur. Even before I am a member of the Holy Church, that's my Path. Before this Desolate Child of Loss, I had never met a creature who needed guidance more. You called him a living calamity, but he is not. He is just a creature with power he's never learned to control and emotions he cannot comprehend. As the name implies... he is still only a child."

Jake let Jacob talk and give his entire explanation. Sadly for Jacob, in the end, Jake definitely wasn't satisfied.

"That answered nothing," Jake scoffed. "Have you ever heard of the word no? I didn't ask what others told you to do but why you did it. Oh, and no matter what, if we at all go by that second explanation that you were just valiantly trying to guide a lost child, then using that child as a soldier to fight right after doesn't seem very Augury now, does it?"

"I told you before, nothing went as I had hoped, and the internal politics of the Holy Church are incredibly complicated, so—"

"Bullshit excuses," Jake once more scoffed. "You make it complicated by not having a fucking spine. Without even going into how fucked up it is that you wanted to help the Desolate Child in the first place, you were the one who chose to release him here today. You could have told the head priest to fuck off, but you didn't."

Jacob just looked at Jake, not even offering any excuses as he just looked at the ground. "Again... the situation isn't what I hoped it would be. But please, do at least allow me to try and make you understand while we go where the Runemaiden and the False God are fighting."

"Fine," Jake said after a moment's thought, having wanted to head over there anyway. "But don't you try anything."

"I won't," Jacob said as he, Jake, and Bertram headed off. The Augur was definitely not the fastest flier, but then again, Bertram was also bloody slow. Still, Carmen wasn't fighting that far away, and Jake had a basic understanding of how the battle between the two was going, and he was definitely impressed by the sheer dominance of the Runemaiden.

Shortly after they set off in flight, Jake heard the Augur's voice echo in his mind. *"I apologize for not being entirely straightforward, but I'm not in a position to speak freely these days. Even now, I'm constantly under surveillance, and I couldn't be sure if anyone was still listening in before."*

"No one was listening in as far as I could tell," Jake simply said, confused about Jacob's shift in tone. *"Not that I can see why it would overly matter if anyone had. Another thought that crossed me was also... how is the Holy Church related to the birth of the Desolate Child of Loss?"*

"Not at all," Jacob quickly shot down that notion. *"No one in the multiverse can purposefully create a False God. But I will not deny that we – or especially I – saw an opportunity when the Desolate Child of Loss appeared."*

"Explain," Jake said, genuinely hoping for a bloody good explanation.

"Let me first give you a bit of a backstory on the Desolate Child of Loss. As I suspect you already found out, it was born from a freak accident ritual performed by people entirely brainwashed by Ell'Hakan. People who genuinely believed he was a god. When

they were struggling, facing the onslaught of the Prima Guardian they had foolishly released, they performed this ritual to try and summon Ell'Hakan and make him descend to their planet. As newly integrated people, they didn't even fully comprehend how gods worked, and their old religion mixed with new knowledge and delusion, leading to their ritual being somewhat a success,"the Augur began, and Jake was actually kind of curious as he had plenty of theories himself.

"What they summoned was their idea of what Ell'Hakan was supposed to be. However, their idea and reality didn't match up at all, and what appeared was an incomplete husk. Everything they knew about Ell'Hakan had been a lie, so when the False God was born, the Records it was born with were a complete mess. The main problem was that they didn't have a unified vision of what Ell'Hakan was, as his mass indoctrination made them all simply see him as their ideal kind of god, something that differs from person to person. In the end, nothing fit together, yet Records were born. All that power and faith gathered but crumbled instantly... only for desolation to take its place. All that remains of their original intent is that the Desolate Child of Loss believes it's the Celestial Child. The child has exact copies of some of Ell'Hakan's Records, which is also why he felt like you had killed his other self. That you killed Ell'Hakan, who the Desolate Child of Loss views as a fake he was born to reclaim Records from. Now whatever Records of Ell'Hakan remain were absorbed by you."

"You're saying that the Desolate Child of Loss wanted to kill Ell'Hakan but now wants to kill me?" Jake asked.

"Yes and no. I think the word want is incorrect here, as the Desolate Child of Loss operates nearly entirely on instinct. Most False Gods are born with some prerogative from birth. Either they are made to protect the local tribe or even the planet, or perhaps created to kill a certain enemy. But the Desolate Child of Loss has none of that. This is why I was genuine when I said I wanted to guide him if possible. He needs it more than anyone. Or, well, needed it."

"Your actions still don't really make any sense, at least not to me," Jake said. "Tell me, how am I supposed to interpret this? Because from my point of view, I can't see it as anything other than you knowingly helping a mortal enemy of mine. Even if the Holy Church ordered you to, you did it, so you have to take responsibility."

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"I never approached the Desolate Child of Loss with the intent of having it fight you," the Augur answered. "I told you already. The closest thing to a purpose the Desolate Child of Loss had was to reclaim whatever Records it could to make it at least somewhat whole."

Jake took a moment as they kept flying before he realized: *"You saved it because you wanted to make it fight Ell'Hakan? Seems pretty counterproductive when the same faction is both helping and trying to kill the same person."*

"Some parts of the Holy Church view the Usurper's Bloodline as an invaluable boon that they simply must obtain, while others see the hidden dangers of doing so. As you know, I'm part of the camp that wants his Bloodline dead and gone. I have met Ell'Hakan personally, experienced his Bloodline, and seen what it can do. What he, a mere C-grade, could do with it. I don't even want to imagine someone of a higher grade, much less a god, with such a Bloodline," Jacob answered before continuing.

"Acting against Ell'Hakan openly wasn't an option, though. We simply didn't have the ability to defeat him here in this galaxy... not before the Desolate Child of Loss appeared. You can view the False God as your backup should you have failed to defeat Ell'Hakan. While the head priest believed the Desolate Child was a backup to defeat you, the Holy Mother and I always viewed it as a backup to defeat him."

Jake really wasn't sure how much he trusted Jacob at this point, but his words did make some sense. Something that also made a bit of sense now was why he'd asked Carmen to come along.

"But now that the Desolate Child of Loss has outlived its purpose, you decided to get rid of it," Jake said in a rather cold tone.

"That... is not my choice," Jacob said. *"Genuinely, I believe the Desolate Child of Loss can be guided toward a proper Path. You've seen it today. He has improved his control tremendously in a small amount of time and given enough training and patience, he should one day be able to fully control it. If not in C-grade, his B-grade evolution may even turn the Desolate Child of Loss into something entirely different... perhaps even allowing it to lose its status as a False God."*

"You're seriously asking me to show it mercy?" Jake asked with disbelief. *"You know what? No, I'm not going to assume you are. Because we should both know that's not gonna happen."*

"I did consider asking you to show it mercy, yes, but I know that isn't possible," the Augur said with a mental sigh. *"It has caused too much destruction already, and if I were you, I wouldn't trust me with such a dangerous creature either. Especially not when we will remain trapped in the galaxy for a while longer, and no one would enjoy having something closely resembling a living calamity in their backyard. Finally... you need that fragment, don't you?"*

Jacob mentioning the fragment from which the Desolate Child of Loss had been resurrected made Jake perk up a bit. *"What do you know about the fragment?"* New NOVEL chapters are published on novel.fire.net

“Truthfully? Not much. All I have been able to glean is that it carries some resemblance to the Fallen King,” the Augur said.

“Are parts of his soul in there? Maybe even his Truesoul or something like that?” Jake asked with a bit of hope.

“The Truesoul? No, of course not,” Jacob answered, sounding genuinely confused. *“A Truesoul cannot truly exist in two places at once within reality. Not unless they are clones or avatars. So with the Truesoul of the Unique Lifeform residing within your mask, it cannot also be within that fragment.”*

Jake got quiet as he slowly sighed internally. Honestly, he wasn't even sure what he'd hoped to hear. He already knew the Truesoul of the Fallen King still resided within the mask, but that didn't really help much. Right now, the Truesoul in Jake's mask felt a lot like the Truesoul of Ell'Hakan that Jacob carried around – something he would definitely need to properly claim later.

A Truesoul in itself really wasn't worth much without all that surrounded it and made someone who they were. Records would continue to linger on a Truesoul until it returned to the system, which is how the Holy Church would resurrect Ell'Hakan, but the Records would be incomplete and shattered.

That's why the resurrected Ell'Hakan would be nothing more than an empty shell of his former self. Chances were he wouldn't even know who he was. The same was true for the Fallen King... while it was possible Jake could resurrect the Unique Lifeform, what would the point be if what appeared wasn't the Fallen King that Jake knew?

He'd hoped that the Desolate Child of Loss would give him some hint, and a part of him still hoped that. Alas, only time would tell.

“I want to make something clear, by the way,” Jake said as they were soon at the battle site between the False God and Runemaiden. *“After this bullshit, the Holy Church is gone from the Milky Way Galaxy. That includes you if you truly wish to stay with such a fucked up faction.”*

“I expected that to be the case,” Jacob just answered, not even addressing Jake's heavy hinting that he should bail from the Holy Church. *“It was the foreseeable outcome, after all. I am not saying this to lay any blame on you, but one of the reasons the head priest and those he serve chose to side with Ell'Hakan in the first place was because they saw it as their only option. You have already continuously shown your distaste for the Holy Church before, after all. They expected to be thrown out of the Milky Way should you win in the battle of Chosen, so they chose to support the one who would at least continue to allow their presence. Seeing as they believed you would throw them out no matter what, should Ell'Hakan lose, they wouldn't really lose anything.”*

“Except for the potential death of billions by truly making me and the rest of the galaxy into a mortal enemy,” Jake countered with a scoff.

“A rounding error to the gods of the Holy Church,” the Augur agreed, sharing Jake’s disapproving tone.

They didn’t have time to say more as they finally arrived at the battlefield of Carmen and the Desolate Child of Loss. It hadn’t been that far, but, again, Jacob and Bertram were both slow as fuck, making it take a while. Not that their delay mattered much, as Carmen definitely didn’t need help. In fact, Jake was positive she would get angry should he interfere toward the end.

Truthfully, Jake didn’t have a good taste in his mouth after talking to Jacob on the way there, but seeing Carmen in action instantly put him in a better mood.

The Runemaiden was absolutely pummeling the Desolate Child of Loss, not even giving the False God any breaks between her fists slamming into its body. With every hit, her body flashed with energy, and the Desolate Child screeched in pain and anger as it tried to retaliate. From the looks of it, the False God had entirely lost any sanity and was just wildly attacking, which just made what was bound to be its final moments sadder.

About a minute more passed before Carmen evidently believed it was time to end things. Jake felt the aura on the battlefield change as the Runemaiden’s body burned with energy and her aura spiked. The golden runes on her body began to turn a shade of red as Jake saw a skill he recognized.

Carmen shot forward and punched the False God as her voice echoed throughout the skies.

“Fist of Ragnarok.”

Jake couldn’t hold back a smile as he saw the absolute destruction unleashed by what he knew was Carmen’s strongest finisher. Even as the shockwave struck him and Bertram had to step in front to defend his Augur, Jake kept smiling, looking out at the massive wave of destruction that had permanently altered the geography of the planet.

An utterly enormous cone-shaped scar of pure devastation stretched out from the battlefield for thousands of kilometers, everything within perfectly destroyed. At the starting point of the cone, Carmen lowered her glowing fist as the False God just floated there for a while, now in five pieces as its entire midsection had been blown away, only leaving parts of two arms and legs as well as the upper half of its head.

Carmen didn’t hesitate to fully finish everything as she knelt down and smashed her fists into the ground. As she did so, the parts of the False God were also forced down, and with a few whispered words, a large rune appeared beneath the broken Desolate Child of Loss.

Jake knew then that things were over as he began floating down, with Jacob and Bertram staying a good distance behind. Making sure not to disturb the Runemaiden, Jake slowly approached, curious about what she was doing.

He didn't recognize the rune at all, which wasn't surprising as it was an entirely different branch of magic than what he practiced, but he could still see the effect. The remaining body of the False God was slowly being dissolved and burned away, the Desolate Child of Loss ultimately dying a sad death for a creature that had been born and killed before fully realizing who and what it was...

And in Jake's mind, just more proof of how fucked up Ell'Hakan's Bloodline truly was.

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Chapter 1067: Finally All Over

Jake kept observing as Carmen finished her ritual, and as the Desolate Child of Loss was fully destroyed, he better understood why bringing her was a good idea. He hadn't even known Carmen had a skill like this, which was seemingly tailor-made to kill creatures like the False God. It was a creature Jake had theorized how to kill himself several times but had never found a better answer than just destroying the body of the False God over and over again with the expectation his opponent would die at some point.

Seeing the ritual now, Jake doubted that would even work. There was a certain stubbornness to a False God's existence. In many instances, they were bound to some totem, or they simply had to fulfill what they were born to do before dying, but Jake had no idea what the conditions for killing the Desolate Child of Loss for good were. He also wasn't confident he could deal more damage than the Fallen King's final unique skill. In fact, he was pretty damn sure he couldn't. And if that hadn't been able to kill the creature, what hope did Jake realistically have?

Yet Carmen evidently had a way to circumvent all that. The runic ritual seemed to target the very root of the False God's existence as its faith energy was rapidly being drained and turned into nothingness... no, not into nothingness.

She's offering it to Valhal and her Patron, Jake realized. All the faith gathered by the Desolate Child of Loss was now nothing more than a gift to the Primordial faction, and as the ritual reached its end, Jake felt Carmen's aura suddenly spike a bunch as she grinned.

“Three class levels and four in the profession,” she said, turning to look at Jake. “Now I feel like you’re the one who did *me* a favor by bringing me here and not the other way around.”

“Just a win-win, I guess,” Jake said as he didn’t really focus much on Carmen but stared intently at what remained after the ritual. As the final remnants of the False God faded away, a fragment was revealed, floating in its place.

It looked like a piece of the Fallen King, just as Jake suspected. He wasn’t sure where from, as the color seemed off from what he was used to, but he knew for sure it belonged to the Fallen King... because, to his enormous relief, it carried the aura of the Unique Lifeform.

Using Identify, his hope grew a little bit more.

[Fragment of the Fallen King (Legendary)] – A single fragment and all that remains of what had once been the Unique Lifeform known as the Fallen King. Records and energy of the Fallen King remain within, granting this fragment incredible durability and the ability to enhance certain soul-related abilities when used as a catalyst. Has many alchemical uses, especially when used in any soul-related creations. WARNING: Unknown energies linger within that may lead to unforeseen effects upon use.

Especially that last sentence stood out. Unknown energies could be so many things, and knowing the Fallen King, Jake couldn’t help but see a reality where the Unique Lifeform had managed to save some parts of himself. He also recalled that the King had infused the mask Jake wore with something before heading off and “defeating” the Desolate Child of Loss. He still couldn’t figure out what that something was, and honestly, right now, the more things Jake didn’t understand, the more hopeful he felt.

There was just one thing about this fragment that Jake viewed as a problem... it had technically come from the Desolate Child of Loss, which Carmen had slain, meaning it didn’t belong to Jake. However, before he could even say anything, Carmen reached up and took the fragment before instantly tossing it to Jake.

“Yeah, no, I saw that look. I’m not that much of a bitch to take advantage in a situation like this. Oh, and I would be very mad you assumed I would, which you totally weren’t, right?” Carmen said with a threatening smile.

“Such untoward thoughts would never even dare cross my mind,” Jake said with a stoic look as he put away the fragment before smiling. “Thanks. I do owe you one for helping out here today, no matter what. I also hope it won’t be a problem that you helped me fight the Holy Church despite being a part of Valhal.”

“What are you talking about?” Carmen asked, faking a look of utter shock. “I never fought the Holy Church! I was merely informed that a dangerous False God had

appeared and promptly went there to face the monstrosity like the true heroine I am! If anything, the Holy Church should be the ones thanking me for having killed a creature that has already destroyed several planets in the galaxy.”

“That is how it will be framed,” Jacob said as he walked forward, gazing out at the nearby land still filled with desolation. “The False God appeared amidst negotiations between the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Holy Church, disrupting everything and killing everyone present in the city besides a scarce few. During this slaughter, the Runemaiden was called to help take down the False God for good... everyone besides the four of us dying in the end.”

The Augur looked in thought for a while before looking at Jake. “If it would make you feel better, you can also have the scenario include my death. That would require changing the narrative a bit, though.”

Jake didn’t even bother giving that a response as he frowned. “You’re really just gonna spin it like that? Blame everything on a now-dead entity?”

“Yes,” Jacob nodded, even if he didn’t look super happy about it. “Assuming you are willing to reconsider reopening the negotiation. As of about a minute ago, I’m the highest authority from the Holy Church in the Milky Way Galaxy, and with permission from the Holy Mother, I have been given full decision-making powers.”

“That head priest guy...?”

“Found himself teleported somewhere with a lot of people not that friendly toward him,” Bertram just shrugged. “While the faction within the Church he belonged to was in charge, that didn’t mean other factions didn’t also have some power. Jacob wasn’t a fan, but sometimes, a few heads gotta roll to get bureaucracy moving.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Jake smiled, at least a little impressed that a trap had obviously been laid to take care of that loose end. Thinking about it, there indeed were only the four of them left as witnesses... besides the gods who knew what had truly gone down that day, of course.

“Will the Lodestar Matron be a problem?” Jake asked after a bit.

“No, she’s not that stupid,” Jacob sighed. “She may complain a bit, but nothing that will ever reach the ears of mortals. In fact, this will likely result in her getting taken down a peg by my Patron as the plans of herself and her allies failed spectacularly. I do find it a bit sad that they lose a war they could have never realistically won, but oh well.”

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“Speaking of your Patron, is she gonna be a problem?” Jake followed up. “And did she really sign off on all this bullshit? Because I genuinely thought she knew better, and if she did, that she could at least control her own damn faction.”

“In the eyes of the Holy Mother, this entire sequence of events would lead to the best final outcome. As I said before, the best end the Holy Church could hope for, assuming you defeated Ell’Hakan, would be a peaceful evacuation. Even if we had approached you as an early ally, what would you have given us? A few planets? The Holy Church desire, no, demands expansion. Even if we tried to limit it, the Church’s influence would create challenges down the lines that would eventually lead to our expulsion or something far worse,” Jacob explained with a sigh.

“On the other hand, backing Ell’Hakan, there was confidence the Holy Church would one day rule the Milky Way Galaxy. With Yip of Yore dead, he would turn to the Church and officially become a member, at which point his victory would be our victory. As for you... yeah, no way you would ever give up the Milky Way no matter how much we tried to convince you. Remember that the gods don’t care about short timespans and they view distance as rather relative. The Holy Mother knew that should Ell’Hakan lose and the Milky Way be lost, there still had to be some way for the Holy Church and your faction to coexist... which is where I come in, I guess.”

“So you’re the backup, huh?” Jake said. “You know, despite your negative outlook, I do think there could have been some kind of compromise if you’d simply been straightforward and not actively worked against me.”

“Well, it’s your fault the Holy Mother even approved working directly against you in the first place,” the Augur shrugged, making Jake look at him confused.

“I guess I should clarify... the Holy Mother never thought you would lose. She saw our Tutorial and, from what I heard, a few of your Nevermore exploits. More than that, she knows the Malefic Viper,” Jacob explained. “If the Holy Church had operated with the assumption that you and the Malefic Viper would obviously defeat Yip of Yore and Ell’Hakan, it could have given away the schemes of your Patron. That’s why the Holy Mother allowed the internal faction to run wild despite her knowing how much of a waste it is. Besides, on the off-chance Ell’Hakan did somehow win, she would already have hedged her bet.”

Jake frowned as he considered for a moment. “I had no idea the Holy Mother was also in on the scheming.”

“While I don’t know for sure, I don’t think she was,” Jacob shook his head. “She just actively chose not to hurt the Viper’s chances but inadvertently helped him instead, as if even the largest faction in the multiverse saw it as a real possibility that Yip of Yore could kill the Malefic Viper, it would certainly give the god more confidence. Plus, and this is just my personal interpretation, I also think she viewed this as a chance to see how certain members of the Holy Church would act if given more power than usual. If

I'm right, and that is still a big if, I could see her consider yanking back their leashes a bit. While the internal factions in the Holy Church are all legitimately powerful, they are still all below the Holy Mother, for without her, there would be no Holy Church."

"Have I ever mentioned that I really hate politics? Divine politics just sounds like the worst of it with everyone being immortal and stuff," Jake sighed, remembering that Villy had also used this entire conflict with Yip of Yore to wipe out those less trustworthy. It wouldn't be weird if the Holy Mother had done something similar.

"I believe such words have been uttered before by you," Jacob chuckled.

"Eh, just to check, is it alright that I'm also being told all these things?" Carmen asked, scratching her elbow while looking uncomfortable.

"You're just hearing the personal theories and ramblings of a defeated member from the Holy Church," the Augur chuckled. "Truthfully, I don't know, but you should be able to keep a secret, and if you don't learn it from me, as a Runemaiden of Valdemar, you're bound to learn things like this eventually. Your Patron isn't the most subtle or secretive Primordial."

"I guess," Carmen shrugged, letting the two people with slightly similar names that some argued could be easily confused continue their discussion.

"What exactly do hope will happen after all this?" Jake asked, getting back on track.

"As we've already established, the Holy Church has lost the battle for the Milky Way Galaxy. With that in mind, I would like to officially surrender as a representative of the Holy Church and discuss the terms," Jacob answered. "I don't think you want to start a needless slaughter of the average Holy Church member, and needless to say, It's also something I want to avoid. So, I hope that, at the very least, we can agree to allow the evacuation of every Holy Church member in the Milky Way Galaxy."

"Is the Holy Church really willing to invest that many resources in saving mortals?" Jake asked, knowing how pragmatic the faction tended to be.

"See, in this instance, it's rather lucky that there are so many eyes on the Milky Way Galaxy. If we left them behind, there would be many enemies who would use it against the Church, while should we invest a lot to evacuate everyone properly, it will look incredibly good and show everyone how much we care about every member," the Augur answered, a bit self-deprecatingly. "Besides, the move won't even be that far."

"Oh?" Jake asked. "I assume you mean they will remain in the same universe?"

"Of course," Jacob nodded. "And quite nearby, too. This is another reason why we wanted this matter settled without there publicly being a lot of bad blood between the Holy Church and the faction you are creating. Sure, the relationship won't be good, we

with the agreement today, there will at least be a precedent that we can be diplomatic, which is pretty needed as even if you push the Holy Church out of this galaxy, we're still neighbors."

"So the Holy Church has quite the presence in surrounding galaxies?" Jake asked, wondering if they'd even gotten a strong foothold in the Andro-

"The Andromeda Galaxy has, for all intents and purposes, been wholly taken over by the Holy Church. Even before the Prima Guardian event, it was mostly conquered using the Prima Alliance system, and after the system event, I believe the takeover will be complete," Jacob explained. "Some other factions do also retain a presence there, but the one officially ruling everything will be the Holy Church, of that there is no doubt."

"I guess I can't get rid of you entirely quite yet, huh," Jake muttered semi-jokingly. "I assume you're also going?"

"Of course," Jacob nodded before letting out a sad sigh. "I will miss Earth, but I also know going there would only be cause for trouble."

"You could always sneak in," Jake shrugged.

"I have absolutely no stealth skills, am publicly known by many people, and entering without permission will no doubt only lead to even more problems," Jacob shook his head with a chuckle. "I can see that Miranda has her work cut out for her." Follow current novels on [novel●fire●net](#)

"She does complain," Jake confirmed. "Anyway... I think rather than me, discussing the details of the Holy Church's surrender would be better done with her."

"I expected as much. I just need us to agree on the basic facts," the Augur said.

"Sure. I already told you earlier. The Holy Church is to leave the Milky Way Galaxy as soon as possible, and you'll be banned from the galaxy going forward. Even if we go by your story that the head priest was some traitor who lost his way, you'll still have proven with this meeting that the Holy Church isn't a trustworthy faction," Jake began. "Oh, and until the moment of evacuation, Holy Church members are not to leave for any other planets. All other details you can figure out with Miranda, as you already said."

"Alright," Jacob nodded, things being as he expected from the looks of it.

The Augur sighed loudly as he looked toward the sky a moment before speaking again. "I guess there is still one important thing left to do."

Lifting his hand, a lantern appeared in it. Without any huge fanfare, he channeled energy into it and out came... something. It was wrapped in energy for a brief moment as it exited, but this energy soon dispersed naturally.

Jake intuitively knew it was the end. Without the protection of Jacob, the Truesoul of Ell'Hakan, the Celestial Child, disappeared and returned to the system where it belonged. With that, the Bloodline was gone from the multiverse, and Jake felt a wave of relief knowing it was finally all over.

In what was almost a poetic end, the Desolate and Celestial Child met their ultimate end side by side... so perhaps, in some way, the False God did fulfill its purpose as the two of them were now one with the system.

"Let's go," Jake said, not seeing any reason to be any more sentimental than necessary. He had far more important things to do than waste any more mental energy thinking about a dead asshole.

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Chapter 1068: Only A Few Loose Ends Left

In the end, Jake's trip to the Holy Church's planet didn't conclude as he'd expected. He had fully assumed it would result in Jake and his faction having an all-out war with the stubborn Church, and he was genuinely relieved it hadn't gone that far, as it would just have been so damn pointless.

That was also why Jake cut Jacob some slack in this entire scenario. He was still annoyed at his old boss, but it was hard being angry at someone who genuinely just wanted to do what he thought was best for others. With how utterly fucked up the internal politics of the Holy Church were, his life definitely couldn't be easy either, and honestly... things had kind of turned out pretty okay. And Jake had to give Jacob at least some credit for the ending turning out acceptable despite how fucked the middle had been.

The Holy Church would retreat from the Milky Way Galaxy peacefully. All their elites were slain, and Jake even came out of it looking merciful and reasonable after having not gone all out despite finding himself ambushed by a corrupt head priest and False God.

Miranda would definitely also be happy with the result, and even Carmen had gotten some benefits from killing such a powerful False God, and, despite how much she countered it, it was still a massive feat. All in all, Jake returned to Earth pretty satisfied, even doing so through the capital's teleportation circle in full view of every random Holy Church citizen watching.

Jacob naturally ensured the set dressing was proper, making it evident that Jake was the winning party and that even if the Holy Church had lost, they still maintained some of their dignity. More than that, though, it was all to show everyone that the Holy Church and Chosen of the Malefic Viper could still be diplomatic despite everything.

Returning to Earth, Jake couldn't help but let out a massive sigh as he looked at Carmen, who had returned with him. "Could you imagine having to navigate that much political bullshit all the time?"

"Pretty sure I would end up beating a few people to death within a week," Carmen fully concurred. "But... I guess it's kind of necessary at times? Even Valdemar and Valhal have Gudrun, and every single large faction has a bunch of political folk walking around. Shit, you have Miranda, and I got Sven and Bobby, who are pretty good at handling all the scheming and politicking."

"True," Jake nodded with a sigh as he considered it a bit more. "But having a faction that's good at politics doesn't really matter if you aren't powerful enough. You need that power as a base requirement to even be allowed at the big boy table."

"You also need power to have a figurehead," Carmen pointed out. "The average person doesn't really respect those so-called political masterminds. It's too damn abstract compared to someone truly powerful, and when shit really goes down, it's the one holding the biggest stick who shows up to solve everything. Barely anyone respects and fears the Malefic Viper for being a good schemer and a really smart guy... they remember him for wiping out a tenth of a universe. Everyone, even a child, can understand why the Viper is worthy of his notoriety when they see the wasteland he created that still persists to this day."

"Maybe it's a lot simpler than we think. People simply don't respect political masterminds because no one respects politicians," Jake grinned.

"They totally do!" Carmen countered, acting offended. "They trust the good and honest kind."

Jake and Carmen locked eyes before both laughing at the notion, Jake shaking his head. "Yeah, sure, because those unicorns tend to really climb that hierarchical ladder. Shit, even Jacob, who has a Path all about just helping people, has to do at least some scheming to have any influence. If he didn't, he would just be used and manipulated by others... something I feel like he kind of still is half the time."

"Some things don't change no matter what," Carmen agreed. "It's so dumb. We have fucking dragons now, and people still care about how someone holds a goddamn teacup or if they remember to use the right titles to call others."

"It is what it is," Jake sighed again as the two of them teleported one more time, returning to Haven.

Jacob had stayed back with the Holy Church to properly solidify his newfound leadership position while also fully selling the story that the head priest was a traitor and all that other bullshit. He likely wouldn't even be meeting Miranda, but instead, they would communicate using magic to hammer out all the details surrounding the Holy Church's total retreat.

Upon reaching Haven, Carmen went back to Jake's lodge while Jake headed off to meet Miranda. However, to his surprise, he didn't find her back in her office, and after asking around, he learned she was at Haven's prison.

Jake didn't know Haven had a prison.

In his defense, it was definitely a new addition, and while Jake could scan everything using Pulse of Perception, that didn't mean he fully understood the function of every building. Moreover, the prison wasn't actually in Haven but a good distance away, likely in case any problems arose there.

While Jake was at Miranda's office, he used one of Arnold's walkie-talkies and got in contact with her. She gave him a super brief explanation of the reason she was at the prison and that King Iludar had launched an ambush while Jake was on the Holy Church's planet. At first, he was a bit worried but was quickly informed the situation had been entirely under control from the beginning and that it had effectively been a trap, the hunter being the hunted from the get-go.

She didn't elaborate more but just told him to meet her at the prison for them to talk. Jake agreed and headed out, and after a few minutes of flying and using One Step later, he reached the prison. The entire thing just looked like a large cube slapped down in the middle of nothing. It only had one entrance, and at it, Lillian stood waiting for his arrival.

Jake landed while still looking at the cube, wondering where the hell it had even come from. Lillian noticed his gaze and shook her head. "Arnold made it."

"Arnold?" Jake questioned. "When did he have time to make a damn prison? Why did he make a prison?"

"He calls it a containment cube, and from his explanation, it was originally done in case he needed to trap living entities for testing purposes. Apparently, analyzing Sandy's natural abilities inspired him, and he hopes to find other creatures he can take inspiration from," Lillian answered.

"That somehow makes a lot of sense," Jake muttered, not even bothering to figure out when he'd even found time to build the over a hundred meters tall and wide cube. "Why is it used as a prison now, though?"

“Because he has yet to need it himself, and Miranda offered to rent it in return for providing him with extra funds,” Lillian answered, the reason once again pretty logical.

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Walking into and through the prison cube, Jake found the insides very basic. Everything was made of metal, and several formations were engraved into the structure everywhere. He also spotted several spider-like drones crawling around, maintaining and even engraving new runes here and there, giving Jake his answer to how Arnold had found time to construct the cube anyway. Follow current novels on **novel~fire~net**

He hadn't... he had just reached a level by now where he could have his creations create more stuff. Scary implications with that one, but oh well.

With his sphere, he could already see Miranda in a room talking with some guy in what looked like a barebones meeting room where she'd brought all the furniture herself. Nearly the entire cube was filled with pretty small “cells” created with thick metal walls on every side beside the front, which Jake suspected to be some kind of glass.

The way to keep prisoners, well, imprisoned, was the classic method Jake had read about before. Formations were placed in every cell that drained the stamina and mana of those within, making them incredibly weak. It wasn't pleasant, but it also wasn't the worst.

One huge advantage compared to regular prisons in the old world was the existence of the meditate skill. The First Sage had really done the multiverse's prison population a solid with that one, as it allowed them to have time pass seamlessly.

Jake didn't really spend more time analyzing the prison besides that, but he did notice Lillian purposefully leading him through where many of the prisoners were held. On the way, she explained they were some of the elites brought by Iludar, and it didn't require one to be a political mastermind to understand that Lillian wanted them to all know that Jake was now also there.

Entering the barebones meeting room with Miranda in it, he found her sitting across from an elf Jake didn't recognize, but by the look the guy gave him, Jake assumed it had been one of Iludar's soldiers.

“Ah, Lord Thayne, It's good to see you back,” Miranda said with a smile. “How did your meeting with the Holy Church go?”

Jake instantly understood the assignment as he shrugged. “Slightly better than expected. Things did get a bit out of hand when a traitor amongst them summoned the False God that had destroyed several planets during the event alongside a few thousand of his elites. It took a bit to get the situation back under control, but after they

were dead, I managed to reach a satisfactory agreement with the Church. They have officially surrendered unconditionally, and I expect you to handle the details.”

“I see,” Miranda smiled, her facial expression not changing at all besides that. “Mr. Jiulpoar, if you would excuse us for a moment, I will need to briefly discuss this with Lord Thayne.”

The man just nodded, looking deeply in thought as he was led away, now having even more to think about after knowing that even the Holy Church had been fully defeated. Iludar and his men attacked because Jake was gone from Earth, so they clearly knew he had gone to meet the Holy Church so just the mere fact he was back and seemingly unharmed for the most part had to mean things had gone his way.

Once the guy was out of the room, Miranda sighed and leaned back. “Just to make sure, did you exaggerate?”

“Nope, not at all,” Jake said, summoning his own chair. “I did lie, though. About the traitor part, that is.”

Jake proceeded to explain what had gone down on the Holy Church’s planet, gladly making use of the soundproofing of the meeting room. Miranda was surprised at quite a few points but didn’t seem overly shocked when Jake explained what had happened after the fight and the explanation Jacob had cooked up to explain everything.

“I didn’t expect them to have the Desolate Child of Loss... but in some ways, it puts my mind at ease knowing they did. Now we at least know for sure the False God is dead and gone and not some unknown potential threat that could reappear at an inopportune time,” Miranda said after thinking a bit. “I’m also glad to hear you found the fragment of the Fallen King... hopefully it can lead to something.”

“Thoughts on Jacob and what he said?”

“I’m not surprised. Say, did the Augur not mention Kindroth at all?” Miranda asked, looking a bit perplexed.

“No?” Jake asked, confused. “Should he have?”

“I would say he should,” Miranda sighed. “He has been working with Jacob all along. To clarify, he isn’t part of the Holy Church, and the Great Bright One isn’t part of the Holy Pantheon either, but they are close allies of the Church. I’m still trying to figure out how exactly we’re going to deal with Kindroth. Still, it’s unquestionable he’s helped us out during this entire system event. He was also the one who tipped me off about Iludar’s ambush and helped set it up to eliminate this hidden threat.”

“Great, just great... I did always think there was something pretty shady about him, so I can’t say I’m overly surprised. I am a bit disappointed, though,” Jake sighed. He had

heard that the Great Bright One had positive relations with the Church before, but he hadn't expected them to outright work together behind the scenes. "What are your current thoughts on handling him and his planet?"

"Before this, I didn't really have any set plans, but now... I feel like the best approach would be to not do anything but just continue as normal," Miranda said. "Even with the Holy Church gone from the galaxy, we will no doubt have to deal with them again in the future. Especially with them apparently having quite a presence in the closest galaxy. While we can try to entirely isolate ourselves from them, I don't see that as realistic, and my guess is that both the Augur and Kindroth also realize this. At least, I suspect that's part of the reason they chose to work together in this fashion, to have a backup should the Holy Church be thrown out of the galaxy."

While Jake wasn't the fastest at political stuff, he did realize what Miranda was getting at pretty quickly. "Kindroth and his planet can function as a compromise. As they're not actually part of the Church, having them here doesn't violate their effective ban from the galaxy, yet at the same time, it allows the Church to retain some connection the the Milky Way. We do need to make sure the benefits aren't all one-sided, though."

"Leave that to me," Miranda said with a proud smile that Jake had seen through what she was thinking. "But one headache at a time. For now, I need to deal with all the elite soldiers left by Iludar."

"What's the current plan?" Jake asked.

Miranda sighed and leaned forward. "Right now, they have nothing. Iludar is dead, the Holy Church has surrendered, and they have no allies left besides each other. What's more, Iludar even tried to just leave them all behind to save his own skin. While I'm not saying they will be a big boon or anything to have on our side, I do believe there are some benefits to expanding our fighting force. Successfully integrating them will also reinforce your actions today that even if we are a faction led by the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, we can still be reasonable and merciful."

"If you think they can be successfully assimilated, go for it," Jake shrugged, not really having a big opinion. She had been the one getting ambushed, not him.

"I do, but it'll take some convincing, and I will have every person vetted individually, hence why we're keeping them here for now. Hopefully, we'll be done within a few days," Miranda said. "Could end up being a little longer, though. The negotiations with the Holy Church may drag things out more than I would like. By the way, did the Augur mention anything about how they plan to compensate us?"

"Compensate?" Jake asked before realizing. "Oh... yeah, I didn't think about that at all."

"It's only right to expect some kind of war compensation from a defeated force. Especially when that defeated force is the largest faction in the entire multiverse, and

with so much attention on the Milky Way, they need to come out of this looking as good as possible... so I reckon I can get quite a bit out of them,” Miranda said, truly looking in that moment like the evil witch from the Order of the Malefic Viper so many believed she was.

“And that’s why I said you would handle all the details,” Jake gave her a thumbs-up.

The two of them were quiet for a while before Miranda smiled. “It’s finally all over, huh? Only a few loose ends left to tie up.”

“For now, at least,” Jake nodded. “But there’s still a lot to do. We need to stabilize the galaxy as much as possible before the system event ends and the universe opens up more than it currently is. I also suspect it will be more open than it was before the event began... likely even allowing some of those from across the multiverse to come here.”

Miranda nodded solemnly. “Yeah, I’ll make sure we’ll be as ready as we can. You also do your part. Keep being the big scary Chosen of the Malefic Viper that no one dares mess with.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jake grinned before getting up. “I guess I’ll get to just that. See you, and good luck.”

“Take care,” Miranda nodded as Jake headed out of prison and back toward the lodge... where he instantly spotted two of the few people in the multiverse who dared mess with him. Both of them committing a horrendous crime.

Because not only had Carmen stolen more of Jake’s bananas... she had even gone as far as to rope Sylphie into being her partner in crime.

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Chapter 1069: Ambitious Plans

Despite being caught red-handed – or taloned, in Sylphie’s case – the two showed no remorse after having once more stolen Jake’s bananas. He was seriously beginning to consider if he needed to create an actual defensive barrier to keep them safe at this point. Alas, at least the musa was still growing after Jake had added the soil from that time mage guy in Nevermore City. It would probably grow faster if it didn’t have its bananas stolen all the time, but Jake didn’t have much recourse if he wasn’t even ready to start a war with Valhal over the Great Banana Incident.

In all seriousness, getting a chance to sit down and relax in his lodge was nice after everything that had just gone down, and the sense of catharsis was overwhelming. Jake enjoyed himself as he heard all about Sylphie's adventures with her parents and whatever mischief she'd been up to.

Mystie and Hawkie weren't around very often anymore, but were exploring parts of the planet people on Earth rarely ever visited. One had to remember that the vast majority of the planet was still unclaimed wildlife, with quite a few areas filled with even mid to high-tier C-grades being located.

This was still more than good enough for the two early-tier C-grade hawks, who were progressing fast and should probably head to Nevermore at some point. However, the little green hawk was already beyond finding any opponents who stood a chance against her on the planet. She was in the same camp as most other pinnacle figures on Earth, and by now, Jake really didn't feel like there was much to hunt... well, anywhere, really.

Alright, there was still one chance to find stuff that would give Jake experience: dungeons. However, these dungeons were few and far between, with not a single one identified yet with peak C-grade monsters within, much less B-grades.

The same was true for all the planets in their alliance. Earth actually had very high level wildlife compared to them, with only a couple matching or slightly surpassing Earth, primarily on account of being larger.

Hopefully, some dungeons Jake found worth visiting would be located as Miranda slowly put a full claim on the entire galaxy, but he didn't have his hopes up. That meant if Jake really wanted to fight something worth fighting, he would have to head beyond the planets with sentient life and seek out less-than-hospitable places. The Moon was an option, but Jake didn't feel ready to take down the ghost there quite yet.

Perhaps it was time to visit Mars soon... or maybe Venus or Mercury. Venus was closer if the orbit was just right, so maybe going there would be worth it, but Jake wasn't sure it was a trip he wanted to make alone.

Anyway, after Sylphie was done telling tall tales about the grand foes she faced with her parents – faced in this instance mainly being Sylphie just watching as she was too strong to really take part – Carmen let out a reluctant sigh.

"I would really love to stay, but I'm pretty sure I will have people yelling at me if I don't return soon. There's bound to be quite some waves going through the galaxy now that all worthwhile opposition to the rule of Supreme Overlord Thayne has been defeated," Carmen said jokingly.

"My first edict shall be the banning of calling me a Supreme Overlord," Jake joked back. "Followed by hefty fines for any banana thieves."

“Ree?” Sylphie asked with a tilted head.

“Yes, that includes you. You have to ask permi-“ NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON **novel**fire**net**

“Wait, don’t you have a minimum age? Little Sylphie is still a minor. How can she be considered responsible?” Carmen shot back as she hugged the bird, who looked at Jake with the most pitiful eyes.

“We were in Nevermore for fifty years,” Jake said with a blank expression.

“Those weren’t real years,” Carmen waved him off. “If they were, it would mean you’re older than your parents now, and if you think about that just a little, wouldn’t that be fucking weird? Way easier to just not count those years and keep yourself sane.”

Jake was silent for a moment before sighing. “See, this is why I shouldn’t be the one making laws.”

“Amen to that,” Carmen chuckled. “Anyway, as I said, I’ll be off. I do plan on returning again in not that long, but with how everything is, I honestly don’t have a timeline.”

“You go have fun,” Jake waved off the Runemaiden. “I will contact you if I get up to something interesting you may want to take part in. Probably off-planet exploration or something like that.”

“You better give me a call,” she smiled before walking out the door and shooting into the sky... after stealing yet another banana on the way, and the cheeky smile on her face when she did it only made matters worse.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked with a tilted head.

“You’ve had enough already,” Jake said decisively, denying the poor hawk any more snacks for now. With Carmen gone, Jake considered what he should be doing next, and honestly... there was a lot to do.

Sylphie seemingly realized Jake was gonna be boring and start working, so she decided to head off and see if Arnold wanted to play. Apparently, the scientist had discussed working with her to better optimize pneumatic systems or something like that, and with a promise of plenty of snacks, the little hawk had instantly gotten interested.

Arnold had truly figured out how to entice powerful beasts to help him with his experiments... you just had to feed them.

Alone in the lodge, Jake headed down to his lab. He wasn’t planning on doing any alchemy quite yet, at least not the traditional kind. Instead, he decided to do a proper

check-in on something he'd only occasionally glanced at over the last many years while also infusing some arcane energy here and there.

Jake took out his Cradle of Soul's Kindling – the mythical reward he'd received from defeating Minaga back in Nevermore. The urn-like item looked the same as usual, and it was only when Jake placed his hands on it and immersed his mind that he could get a proper picture of what was going on with the mythical item.

Within, he saw the vast world with Soulflames of hundreds of affinities everywhere. They had naturally been split into certain domains dependent on the kind of mana found there, with the biggest domain still being one of pure fire. In fact, the four biggest domains were the four elements – water, fire, wind, and earth. This was only to be expected, as they were the most dominant elements in the multiverse by far and hence also had the most Soulflames affiliated with them.

Fire-affinity Soulflames were unsurprisingly the most common, with the second most common being earth. Earth had a lot of innate life energy, meaning many regular potion alchemists wanted it, and those who dealt with growing or working with plants loved a good earth affinity Soulflame.

The basic elemental ones were also pretty damn good, as they were easily upgraded and altered. A water affinity Soulflame was easily turned into an ice affinity one, as an example. If Jake had to do a rough estimate, then more than ninety-five percent of all alchemists with Soulflames had one of the four elemental ones or a slight offshoot of one. As a side note here, most Holy Church alchemists, for example, who used holy magic simply altered a basic elemental one with the holy affinity, making holy fire Soulflames or something like that.

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As for the remaining five or so percent... they had the rarer ones. Dark and light-affinity Soulflames were very rare but often didn't offer many benefits when it came to regular alchemy, while something like space or even time-affinity Soulflames were unbelievably rare and incredibly useful. But they were still far from the rarest.

No, the rarest Soulflames were by far those that were one of a kind... Arcane Soulflames. Which was exactly what Jake was trying to make. The biggest challenge with these Soulflames was to actually make one, though.

Soulflames couldn't be created or crafted purposefully. The most one could do was create an environment to make them more likely to appear. That was exactly what the Cradle did, and it was by far Jake's best opportunity to get an Arcane Soulflame.

As a reminder, Soulflames had the rarities of elementary, low-tier, mid-tier, high-tier, pinnacle-tier, and Supreme Soulflames, with Jake naturally going for either a pinnacle or

Supreme Soulflame. Getting anything less would be such a waste of the mythical item, as once a Soulflame was extracted, the Cradle would break.

When Jake looked within the Cradle, he didn't find any pinnacle or even Supreme Soulflames anywhere. Not among any of the affinities. The best Soulflames in there right now were all high-tier, and to Jake's pleasant surprise, one of them was an Arcane Soulflame.

To make matters better, while the four largest regions were those of the four elements, the fifth largest was the arcane domain. Jake's constant infusions of energy had borne fruit, and the arcane region was clearly still expanding. It couldn't expand too much, though.

Because the way the Soulflames grew was by consuming one another, and Jake had realized a while ago that his Arcane affinity preferred to devour other affinities. This was definitely out of the ordinary, as other Soulflames tended to either consume their own kind or affinities they countered. Again, going back to the elemental ones, water consumed fire, earth consumed water, and so on and so forth.

So seeing Jake's Arcane Soulflames consume nearly entirely other kinds of Soulflames was a bit weird, but Jake didn't question it. He knew his affinity was kind of odd in that the best counter to Jake's own destructive mana was his stable mana.

Jake kept watching the Cradle for a while as the Soulflames slowly moved about within, occasionally bumping into one another, at which point one would consume the other, though sometimes both also just dispersed into nothingness. This entire Soulflames business really was pure gambling, but Jake had definitely increased his odds significantly with the Cradle.

He still wasn't confident he would ever create a Supreme Soulflame, but hopefully, he could at least get a pinnacle one. He had theorized a while ago that the Cradle couldn't even make Supreme Soulflames by default. Instead, one could only be born when extracted. This theory mainly hinged on the part of the description of the Cradle that read:

“Only a single Soulflame can truly be born from the Cradle, the item getting destroyed upon extraction as all others become fuel for the chosen one.”

This could only be interpreted as the extracted Soulflame getting a good boost along the way when extracted. Seeing as his Arcane affinity liked to consume all other Soulflames, he felt even more confident he only needed a pinnacle-tier one.

Looking at the Cradle one more time, he looked at the high-tier Arcane Soulflame and gave it a mental cheer.

You got this, buddy!

When he did this, he felt as if the Soulflame started to move slightly faster as it approached another affinity's domain... but seeing as Soulflames weren't even living beings or had any kind of mind or will, he quickly wrote it off as coincidental or perhaps just wishful thinking.

Shaking his head, Jake infused some more arcane energy to continue expanding the domain before he emerged from the Cradle. Progress was definitely being made, and soon enough, Jake was confident he would have a great Soulflame.

As for what he would even use the Soulflame for?

Well... stuff. He would figure it out.

Moving on.

Putting away the Cradle to continue doing its thing, Jake checked on a few other things he'd neglected. After doing a round, he finally took his time to properly rejuvenate after his recent battle. While Jake wouldn't say he had been very pressured, he had consumed a lot of resources due to his liberal use of Pride and arcane bombardments.

Besides, Jake wanted to meditate. When he closed his eyes and reopened them within the Soulspace, he was greeted with the world he'd created and was instantly put in a better mood. Landing in the colorful forest, Jake went toward the small wooden building he'd constructed to house the tome left by the First Sage.

Going inside, he didn't wait to start reading the book that he knew he had no chance to properly understand, even if he spent the next thousand years just sitting there. Still, he wanted to, at the very least, get some gains and work toward upgrading his meditate skill.

He wouldn't be able to read the book for too long before he would begin to feel mental exhaustion, so he also planned on having some alchemy sessions in between these head-ache inducing reading sessions.

With the upgrade to Sagacity, there were a few things he wanted to try, including maybe looking into learning the basics of creating some stuff he'd never bothered to learn before. All to shore up his foundation a bit... because now, with Ell'Hakan dealt with and the Milky Way stabilized for the most part, Jake had to think about what came next:

The push toward B-grade.

And while he hadn't exactly written down a checklist of things he wanted to get done before evolving, there was one thing he really wanted to do while still in C-grade. The idea had wormed its way into his mind a good while ago, and he simply couldn't let it go. Ever since he'd learned they existed, he had a childish wish to fight one, and now,

before his evolution, he wanted to do what many would call foolishly arrogant and incredibly stupid...

Hunt down a True Dragon.

As Jake was busy doing his thing, the rest of the Milky Way Galaxy was naturally also busy. Many of Ell'Hakan's allied forces were still fighting even as Iludar met his end and the Holy Church surrendered, but facing the Sword Saint and the army he led across the galaxy, they didn't stand a chance.

When news of Iludar's demise and what had happened between the Holy Church and the Chosen of the Malefic Viper spread, the morale of the remaining enemies reached an all-time low. Miranda and the Sword Saint, along with all their other allies, did all they could to spread these massive pieces of news to destabilize the leadership structures of their enemies and lead to internal conflicts, and boy, did it work.

Revolutions happened left and right as those with actual power clashed with those in leadership positions. The warriors and generals knew they faced inevitable death if they kept fighting, but the World Leaders and other politicians knew they, too, would face death even if they surrendered. When these two finally clashed, it wasn't hard to figure out who won.

This resulted in the Sword Saint and his forces often arriving on planets that had already surrendered. That, or they noticed someone they expected to be an enemy suddenly open up their planets for all others to teleport there.

When the first of the otherwise steadfast opposition fell, it was like a house of cards. Nobody had any idea who to cut teleportation off from, and even if they tried, there were often some traitors who had seen the writing on the wall and invited Earth's forces.

During all this, the Holy Church also pulled back all remaining members they had spread out across the galaxy and gathered on a select few planets awaiting evacuation. Tension was high, and Miranda made sure to send people to not only monitor everything but also very clearly communicate who the winners of this conflict had been, leaving nothing up to interpretation or the Holy Church's spin.

Preparations for what would come after the Prima Guardian event concluded also began. All the teleporters linking the galaxy together were granted by the system for the event, and even Arnold's teleporter and those like it relied on the Prima Vessels. While it wasn't completely confirmed all these teleporters would stop working when the event ended, that was the assumption Miranda went with.

With that in mind, some form of communication system was still required. Luckily, many magical rituals allowing long-range communication did exist. Still, even so, Miranda wanted something more reliable, and Arnold was happy to provide it. The scientist had access to far more resources now, as he not only had Earth to procure from, meaning

he could speed up production even more than before. With further promises from Miranda, he began creating what would effectively be an intergalactic phone service powered by void magic. And he was just one of many working on the preparations for what would come next.

All in all, there were a lot of things to consider and a lot of matters to deal with, but there was a generally positive outlook in the Milky Way Galaxy now that all the fighting had died down, and with the Prima Guardians dead, most believed no more system-created threats hung over their heads. With peace being found, the politics really began to pick up as ambitious politicians began to try and seize whatever influence they could, and even if no one was clear yet how the final leadership structure of the galaxy would look like in the end, one thing was certain:

Earth would be at the center of everything... and naturally, so would their World – soon to be Galactic - Leader, Jake Thayne.

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Chapter 1070: Across the 93rd Universe

As things in the Milky Way Galaxy calmed down, the exact opposite was happening around it.

All across the ninety-third universe, the Prima Guardian event was only now starting to really pick up in pace. As the thousand-day deadline till all the Prima Guardians would be released grew closer, the local leaders and fighters were under more pressure. They needed to kill as many Primas as possible to ensure the Guardians weren't too powerful when released, and even then, there was a lot of uncertainty if they could even kill the boss.

A few galaxies got lucky and had certain planets where powerful elites emerged, capable of slaying the Prima Guardian by manually having the World Leader release it prematurely. These elites could then help out other planets that had chosen to take part in the Prima Guardian Alliance. Often, this help came at a price, though.

These planets with actual power began to suppress and expand across their galaxies to gain more power, using the system event as nothing more than a vehicle to spread their influence. Often, several such forces appeared in the same galaxy, and with the event only lasting a measly thousand days, it was far from enough for one definitive leader to emerge in the majority of galaxies.

Of course, there were massive standouts. The Milky Way Galaxy barely needed to be mentioned, as everyone knew it was at the top of the list for anomalies. They were the first galaxy to slay every Prima Guardian, and by a fair margin, too. Again, not a surprise to anyone.

It had been the galaxy with the two top individuals on the Nevermore Leaderboards, after all. If they weren't the first to clear the event, who else could be? The Milky Way was far from being the only galaxy to kill all the Prima Guardians before the event would naturally conclude, though. They were just the first ones to do so.

The second galaxy to kill every Prima Guardian was one of the smallest galaxies in the universe. It had only a couple of hundred planets with enlightened on it, and due to the appearance of a single warrior who killed every single Prima Guardian by himself, the entire galaxy was blessed with taking second place. What's more, this warrior did it expecting nothing. He had an absolutely stellar reputation, which was also why everyone was willing to put their trust in him. The man was not even a World Leader himself or a contender for anything related to the system event.

No, he was merely a humble wanderer. At least that's what he called himself, though many would recognize him as the Eastbound Monk, number seven on the Nevermore 93rd Universe Leaderboard.

Third place in the universe was taken not due to any individual but the combined efforts of a galaxy steeped in death energy that the Risen had quickly taken control of. The rest of the top ten spots for galaxies were also claimed by the major factions of the multiverse, and while they all had standout geniuses, the primary reasons for their victories were their unity and the absence of internal conflicts.

Nearly all of the top Nevermore contenders native to the ninety-third universe also had their galaxies rank in the top one hundred to clear the system event. Of course, there were some absent, and some who wouldn't even appear on the list at all. The most update n0vels are published on *novel**fire**net*

Facing the Prima Guardian was an event for the enlightened races of a galaxy, but that left out a lot of people. In fact, the majority weren't even part of the enlightened races, so what happened to them?

Well, the monsters had their own event. This isn't to say that monsters couldn't also benefit from the event of the enlightened races if they were on a planet with enlightened natives, but what would happen if they were from planets with no enlightened presence at all?

That's where they had their entirely separate event and competed against one another. Their objectives were a lot simpler than fighting a Prima Guardian or anything like that. They were simply given the task of being the first to claim the World Core.

This would, of course, be a bit too easy, so the system threw some challenges their way in the form of powerful monsters created to defend the core. Many of the subterranean monsters even got quests and objectives to defend the core, the system actively spurring competition and confrontation between the powerful wildlife of all these planets, intending to have one monster stand at the pinnacle.

In this event, known figures such as Wintermaul and Lopas both utterly dominated, the two of them having already fully conquered their planet in the first place. What's more, once they had already claimed their own World Cores, the system allowed them to continue competing to increase their rewards by challenging other monsters in the galaxy that had also claimed their World Core, to not only find the pinnacle of each planet, but the pinnacle of the entire galaxy.

These events for monsters took place side-by-side in all the galaxies with enlightened races also in them, but also in many of the galaxies where no enlightened resided at all. There were unknown requirements for what made planets eligible, but in general, a certain size and solid diversity of monsters seemed to be required. The event naturally also only included those in C-grade and not the more powerful galaxies where it would be hard to find any creatures below B-grade.

This competition between monsters naturally also took place in the Milky Way Galaxy. Nobody really knew this, but even if they did, the competition between monsters was mostly inconsequential for them. In fact, the monsters of the Milky Way probably had to be happy that Jake wasn't aware of their little event... because if he had been, he would have just viewed their leaderboards as a to-hunt list.

Luckily for them, there didn't appear to be any plans from the system to force further confrontations as the months quickly passed. Soon, hundreds of galaxies completed the event every day, an incredibly slow pace considering the sheer size of the universe.

It was understandable once one factored in that the only way for a galaxy to fully clear the event was for every Prima Guardian to be dead. This meant just a single planet that hadn't been part of the alliance could block the galaxy's completion, assuming the others there didn't construct a teleporter like the one Arnold had made.

Many planets also fell to the Prima Guardians or even just regular Primas during this time. This was only to be expected, and the majority of these weaker planets ended up seeking refuge under the banners of those more powerful, making the event have a pretty respectable clearance rate. Even if only a few percent of planets fell, that would still be billions of worlds lost.

Not that anyone focused on the losers.

As the end of the system event grew closer and closer, the many World Leaders who would soon find themselves being referred to as Galactic Leaders – or at least contenders for that title - began to consider what would come next.

To these leaders or future leaders of their galaxies, they were expected to receive some level of influence over their local Seat of the Exalted Prima. However, they also all knew this was only a prelude. The many Seats of the Exalted Prima that could be found in all the galaxies taking part in the event weren't all World Wonders. They were all merely parts of one... and a ticket to compete for the real thing.

To claim a World Wonder was something no faction would give up on. A World Wonder was like an irreplaceable treasure, and while some of them weren't that useful compared to others, all still held immense value simply on account of their uniqueness and rarity. From the looks of it, if the Trial of Myriad Paths was any indication, this World Wonder would likely hold immense value. If one could be sure of one thing, it was that if something in the multiverse held value, it would be fought for.

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It wasn't even that all the soon-to-be Galactic Leaders necessarily wanted to claim this World Wonder for themselves despite being named Administrators of their local Seats. They knew only the true peak factions had the power to control one, but if they should gain ownership, couldn't they simply sell it or get offered some high position?

Considering all the qualifiers to be an Administrator of the Seat of the Exalted Prima, it shouldn't be the kind of title that could be stolen simply by killing someone. That meant all the Administrators were valuable assets now, as they were the only ones who even had a chance to fight for the true World Wonder.

Of course, before the true battle for the World Wonder could begin, not only did the current system event have to end, but the Administrators also had to reach B-grade for their Administrator's Seals to work, allowing them to teleport to their local Seats.

It was bound to be a tough competition when the time came... but there was no doubt that one galaxy was already ahead of the rest. With the Milky Way Seat of the Exalted Prima being the top-ranked Seat within the entire universe, no one could ignore it. Especially not when one considered who its primary Administrator was.

No one looked forward to competing with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. He was the peak of the all-time Nevermore Leaderboards, after all. When news of Ell'Hakan's and Yip of Yore's deaths spread when the galaxies established contact with the rest of the multiverse, their hopes of victory only fell further. It didn't help when many also learned that not only had Ell'Hakan been slain, but his entire world had met its end at the hands of the Malefic One's Chosen.

With Yip's death, the Malefic Viper had also shown he was truly worthy of his Primordial title. Perhaps more frightening was that the Viper wasn't only known for his power but also his guile. In retrospect, many realized that the Viper had set Yip up from the

beginning and manipulated the entire multiverse, only to reveal his true power when the time was right.

They could only begin to imagine what kind of elaborate schemes and plots they would encounter when battling his Chosen. After all, wasn't it only natural to expect that the Chosen of one of the greatest schemers of the multiverse would also be a mastermind of machinations himself?

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"Did you at least learn anything?" Hank asked as he directed the earth mage to properly stuff the hole and make it look like it had never been there.

"That I shouldn't play with explosives when living in a glass bubble," Jake said, a bit embarrassed.

"I really hope you didn't just learn that today," Hank said in a deadpan tone as Haven's chief of construction probably wondered why he even had to be called for this kind of repair job.

"Well, I certainly learned what NOT to do today," Jake said a bit sheepishly as he waited for his underground alchemy lab to be fixed. While it was a bit embarrassing, sometimes sacrifices had to be made in the name of science.

Jake had made a lot of progress over the last many months, which had led to this situation. Skipping back a bit, after he finished dealing with the Holy Church, Jake had pretty much retreated to his alchemy lab, only coming out occasionally whenever he had visitors or had to deal with anything that couldn't wait. He did have to attend quite a few things with Miranda as she and all the politically savvy folk were hard at work, but truthfully, he tried to hide away in his underground lab as much as possible.

The vast majority of his time was spent either doing alchemy or meditating and reading the meditation tome left by the First Sage. As planned, Jake had begun to research branches of alchemy he'd never really explored before, and after some consideration, he'd landed on making poison mist – or, as it was better known, poison gas.

While he had his Wings of the Malefic Viper skill that was capable of burning his blood and turning that into mist, the effect really wasn't that impressive anymore, primarily because Jake had never worked on upgrading that aspect of the skill. One of the reasons he hadn't been able to upgrade it was probably also due to his lack of understanding when it came to poison mist, so learning more about it was definitely a good idea.

Anyway, Jake had made good progress. At first, he considered using the classical method of creating poison powder that could then be burned to release poison gas, but he quickly abandoned that and simplified the process.

Not to say that making poison gas was simple. It wasn't just to boil a liquid poison, as all that would create was fumes, and while these fumes were toxic for sure, they weren't really anything that could be used to deal any damage to anyone. They were just a byproduct.

No, Jake needed to create liquid poison designed to be turned into gas. It took a while and some studying, during which he sadly had to read things not authored by the First Sage, but in the end, he managed to create a pretty decent death-affinity poison gas.

Well, it wasn't super usable yet. Still, Jake was happy with what he had, considering he hadn't been working on creating poison gasses for long. Plus, he was only doing alchemy part-time with the majority of his day spent studying the art of meditation.

Anyhow, his latest creation had been the start of his current construction woes.

[Rotbreath Poison Gas (Uncommon)] – With every breath, life shall wane. Mixing potent death affinity toxins, a powerful poison gas has been concocted. This poison is primarily inflicted through breathing but can penetrate the bodies of any living beings in contact with it for too long. If inflicted, it will spread through the body and cause necrotic damage to any tissue it inflicts, causing flesh to rot. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal.

This poison gas was good enough for Jake to consider something else important: his delivery method. Right now, Jake created the gas and purposefully compressed and contained it in regular poison flasks. At least he tried to. Jake learned that if compressed enough, the poison would turn back into a liquid, which Jake didn't want, as even when it expanded again, it would take a bit to turn into poison gas.

Also, it kept breaking the flasks as they weren't meant to house highly compressed gasses. Jake considered commissioning ones capable of handling the pressure until he realized that the flasks breaking wasn't a problem; it was a feature. All he had to do was apply a bit of his personal touch:

Stable arcane mana.

That ended up working out great, and while it did mean the poison gas flasks had a limited lifespan as his stable arcane mana would slowly degrade with time, he figured it should be fine. For the record, Jake still had to put the poison gas in bottles. If he didn't, the system wouldn't recognize them as items, which would make him lose out on a bunch of bonuses.

So, the way he used his arcane mana was to fully coat the bottles on the outside. He would then pour in the gas and cover the top of the bottle. Despite the pressure being strong enough to make the bottle explode, Jake's stable arcane mana would keep it together.

This finally leads to how Jake ended up blowing a hole through the glass bubble in his underground lab, the explosion big enough to blow a hole all the way to the surface. The problem with his exploding poison gas bottles wasn't that they exploded, but that they didn't explode enough.

Jake wanted to spread the poison gas faster, so he had the brilliant idea to create poison gas bombs. To make every bomb as effective as possible, Jake tried to pack as much poison gas as possible into every bottle. To ensure nothing dispersed, he tended to funnel the gas into the flasks while still in his cauldron.

Everything was looking so good until Jake had one more brilliant idea. Usually, the way he made his flasks explode was to make the stable arcane mana disperse, thus making the pressure shatter the bottle, but what if Jake instead turned the stable arcane energy into pure destruction and exploded it?

Even better, what if he mixed in a bit of destructive arcane mana with the poison gas itself to make it not lose any potency when mixing with the arcane mana during the explosion?

Well... it had kind of worked?

Granted, it had also resulted in a massive beam of pure destructive arcane energy shooting up from the lid of the cauldron, giving everyone in Haven something to look at when they saw the tall, thin beam of pinkish purple pierce the sky for a few seconds. Jake had even been so smart as to do it in the middle of the night to make more people see. He didn't really fault himself for that one, though, as who the hell even kept track of day and night anymore?

"Do try to be more mindful," Hank said in a slightly scolding tone, the construction manager being one of the few "normal" people in Haven who still spoke to Jake like a normal person. "This time, you got lucky, but what if the angle had been bad? You could have hit the city, and I hope I don't need to tell you why that could have been bad."

"Yeah, I know," Jake sighed. "I think I'll need to look into having some more defensive formations placed around the lab. Maybe we can even discuss strengthening the construction a bit?"

"Or, even better, you can stop doing reckless alchemy experiments," Hank said as he looked at the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Jake didn't even answer, and after a few seconds, Hank just sighed.

"I'll have some people look at ways to reinforce and strengthen the lab's walls... maybe put in some shielding here and there."

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Chapter 1071: Stark Differences

Miranda scanned the latest reports from some of the officials she'd stationed on other planets and sighed after only going over a few. It was an odd thing to say, but she kind of missed the days when they were all at war. War did suck in many ways, yes, but in others, it was also a lot simpler.

In war, you had the option to just crush opposition, but it generally wasn't viewed as very acceptable to kill people for what was the equivalent of a property line dispute. Not that she often encountered property line disputes. In fact, many of the problems she faced came from the fact that no one could agree on basic things.

It was easy to forget at times, but each planet had its own storied history. While seeing all these planets on a map, they only looked like strategic positions to occupy or allied locations, but now that the war was done, she and everyone else were forced to actually deal with how these planets operated beyond what they could contribute to the war effort.

This proved a lot more annoying than she'd hoped.

Cultural norms and each world's leadership structures varied widely. Depending on how technologically advanced the planets had been, the difference only grew starker. Trying to make a few universal rules in the galaxy was a must should there be any kind of actual relationship forming between the different planets.

Like... they had to at least agree that murder was illegal, right? Because on one planet, murder was only considered a minor offense that would result in a minor fine. Unless the person murdered was of nobility, of course... and yes, it was also a massive problem making all the different races get along.

The system and Nevermore had helped make all the different cultures at least a little more similar, but there were still so many damn problems and things that had to be defined down to the most basic of levels.

Is violence allowed? What constitutes violence? Who does the law apply to? Sometimes, more importantly, who doesn't it apply to? Are there any exceptions?

Reading the reports, there were so many examples of commonly accepted norms elsewhere she just couldn't wrap her head around. Not in that she couldn't understand the laws or norms themselves, but how the hell they could lead to a productive society.

Like, on a planet of primarily beastfolk with a very tribalistic society, the way of "courting" a mate was to beat them in a fight... and needless to say, the average Earthling didn't consider getting jumped from behind and getting beaten up a romantic proposal.

Then again, thinking back, Earth also had a lot of messed up laws just a few hundred years ago... actually, they still had a lot of messed up laws. Laws and norms that other planets simply couldn't make any sense of either.

Oh yeah, and none of these issues included the fact that the same planets could have several countries or territories with widely varying cultures and histories. The system had helped a lot to unify planets, but history was not that easily erased. Their best hope truly was time for more generations to be born into the system and this new world. That's why Miranda wanted to craft some baseline laws that everyone could agree on.

Miranda wasn't a lawyer, and right now, she was really happy she wasn't. There were a lot of people smarter than her trying to work on these basic laws, but it was hard to find out what they all had to agree on, and even sometimes what the word "basic" meant.

Needless to say, there were some things that were non-negotiable. As she looked over the reports, Miranda was also relieved that while there had been some instances of slavery in the galaxy, it was actually a lot less than she'd expected. What's more, there was very little pushback to dismantling these institutions... perhaps because many of the current leaders had all just been crushed by a superior force and feared being made slaves themselves.

Miranda also had to admit that now, of all times, was perhaps the best to make all these very fundamental changes. The entire galaxy had just gone through a massive war and lots of turmoil with the Prima Guardians. It was a time of rebuilding, and leaders had died or been ousted. Change was in the air and Miranda was more than keen to take advantage.

As the saying goes, one should hammer when the iron is hot... though it was still hard, especially when dealing with the more underdeveloped civilizations. This was not to say that any civilization was easy.

One example in the opposite direction was the one ruled by Kindroth. They were much more technologically advanced than Earth, which helped explain their massive population and much of their culture. They were big on solidarity, and as they had an utter abundance of resources, they had barely any economic system that could be compared to Earth. In fact, according to Kindroth, the mere act of excessive greed was considered a criminal offense before the system.

Miranda could easily see why the Great Bright One, who was closely affiliated with the Holy Church, found them appealing. Anyway, for Kindroth, becoming the man in charge

through pure regular leadership would have never been possible, so he ended up using religion.

His planet had a weird relationship with religion before the system arrived, which the elf exploited to get influence. Even then, he was smart enough not to try and obtain total control but went the route of having a council do everything. His role had ended up as more of a spiritual guide than an actual World Leader, and the only reason he got elected was because the system required them to elect someone.

Due to this planet being so different from all the others culturally, it was hard to integrate them with any other societies. The people from there also tended to be overly naive and trusting... honestly, there were so many problems with the natives of that planet and having them interact with anyone else. Considering their close relationship with the Holy Church and Kindroth still being a bit in the doghouse, having them mostly stick to themselves, for now, was perhaps the best.

She had enough stuff to deal with. In the reports, there were also many instances of natives from different planets getting into altercations. They were trying to handle it, and things were getting better by the day, but something like what she was planning couldn't be done in just a few years.

Miranda was glad they had completed the system event and achieved relative peace in the galaxy this quickly, as it gave her time to create a good foundation before travel and contact between the different planets would be made more difficult again upon the event's end. Hopefully, given the time she had now, she would be able to fully solidify her position as the number two of the entire galaxy, with the number one being an absent alchemist who was more busy blowing up his lab than actually getting involved as a leader.

Speaking of, Miranda had never directly talked about it with Jake, but she assumed they were on the same page when it came to the Milky Way Galaxy. Jake had expressed that he wasn't interested in directly taking it over, so Miranda would respect that... but she did fully plan on ruling the galaxy as the head of whatever Galactic Council was bound to form.

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Every other planet would be a self-governing vassal under Earth, much like the independent territories currently on Earth. Some would have more self-governance and independence than others. Still, in the end, the ultimate authority in the galaxy would be Earth, and seeing as she was viewed by many as the current de-facto leader of the planet, thus her.

As Miranda had these thoughts, she couldn't help but take a moment to herself as she put down the papers she'd been scanning. She looked at the office she was sitting in for

a moment. She saw how simple it was, and if not for the magical elements, such as crystals containing information and the faint magical sigils placed here and there, one could easily confuse it for a pre-system room.

Thinking back, Miranda used to have a small office a lot like it. She was a manager of a mid-size company, mainly overseeing manufacturing. Back then, the biggest challenge of her career had been when a machine broke down on the same day an important subcontractor failed to deliver on time. Even now, she vividly remembered the stress. How trying to handle a single truck being late while the customer support for the machine manufacturer didn't pick up their phone felt like the end of the world...

Now, she was casually considering how to eradicate unwanted parts of entire cultures while taking control of the galaxy, fully aware things wouldn't stop there. She'd gone from a mid-level manager to someone standing at the peak of the new universe... from an overworked office worker to an even more overworked witch.

At first, Miranda had been apprehensive about her role. In her defense, it was scary suddenly having a guy wearing a mask tell her to manage his "city," with it not being any help meeting literal gods, giving her more context about who she was dealing with.

Slowly, she'd gotten used to her new life, and now, she was looking to the future. She was looking forward to expanding her influence and increasing the size of her domain. The methods she was willing to deploy had also changed dramatically. In the old world, Miranda felt dread having to reprimand, much less fire someone, while now, she'd casually killed people without thinking twice.

I guess this is what they mean when they say that power corrupts, Miranda thought to herself before sighing.

Miranda had changed a lot. She wasn't the same anymore, but neither was the world. Even so, as she saw another document get teleported into her paper pile demanding more mushrooms, Miranda was reminded that at least one thing in her life hadn't changed...

She still had a pain-in-the-ass boss.

"Thanks, mate," Jake said as the large creature handed him a basket full of mushrooms, all of them giving off a good aura. They weren't the best ingredients, but considering he hadn't been able to go back to the Order to restock, they were more than good enough. Especially considering he was still experimenting, and wasting any of his truly expensive materials wasn't worth it.

The large creature in front of him pointed to the basket and showed two fingers, making Jake smile. "You got more?"

With a nod, the large monster confirmed before motioning for Jake to follow, which he promptly did. They entered another cave and proceeded further down as Jake inspected the troll walking ahead of him.

[Troll Grove Keeper – lvl 256]

Rick had made a lot of progress since Jake last checked, and he was even wearing a new pair of pants and an over-the-shoulder bag with spatial storage. From his understanding, part of the reason for his increased progress was the recent system event having helped monsters get a bit of a boost the same way all those of the enlightened did. Plus, Rick was hard-working, no doubt about that. Original content can be found at [novel~fire~net](#)

This only became clearer when Jake entered a new massive cavern that had definitely grown in size since the last time he was there. What's more, when Jake entered it, he instantly felt the powerful death affinity in the air released by all the deathly mushrooms within.

While the cavern above was filled with life affinity plants, courtesy of the wellspring of mana from the Undergrowth dungeon entrance, this cavern was made to be the exact opposite. To enter the cavern, Jake had to walk through a wall of hanging moss which he quickly realized functioned as a barrier to keep all the death affinity inside.

Inspecting the soil, Jake saw a few bones stick out here and there, and as Rick entered, he even took out several large bones before quickly crushing them in his hands and sprinkling the bone dust on the ground. From that alone, it was evident that this entire cavern was carefully curated and created by the troll, and based on the bones, Rick probably also got some hunting done here and there.

Jake was brought back to reality by Rick pointing to a large rock with moss growing on it and letting out a low grunt. Following the finger, Jake went closer and saw that it wasn't just a rock but that it had a lot of metals within. It was about five meters tall and seven meters wide, and all around it, nothing else was growing.

Getting really close, Jake breathed in the mana given off by the moss and found himself impressed as he inspected it.

[Leaden Black Moss (Epic)] – A rare type of black moss that has evolved after being in contact with a powerful death affinity metal for a period of time while under great care. This moss is extremely dangerous and will erode any vitality-based substance it comes into contact with. Due to its proximity to a powerful metal, small particles of said metal may be found within the moss.

"Pretty damn good," Jake said genuinely after he was done inspecting the boulder. There was even a lot of moss on it, and Rick had taken care of it extremely well. He

also hadn't encountered moss mixed with what was essentially lead dust before, but he could see it had some applications. Sadly for him and Rick...

"With the thing I'm making right now, I can't really use any of it, but just seeing it has given me some ideas," Jake said in an encouraging tone.

Rick stared at him before grunting and shaking his head.

"Oh... well, once it's ready for harvest, I may have an actual plan for using it, then," Jake said after being promptly informed he wasn't allowed to take any of the moss. Rick wanted to get it to ancient rarity before harvest, which Jake could respect.

Nodding, satisfied with Jake's answer, Rick led Jake to pick some more mushrooms while pointing and motioning for the things he wanted Jake to see. As they walked around, Jake really began to realize how little he knew about gardening and cultivating ingredients in general. He had also fully resigned himself to never really learning much about it.

There were some areas Jake had to limit himself and as a spoiled young master with unlimited resources courtesy of his Primordial sugar daddy, learning how to tend to a garden seemed like the obvious thing not to learn. That isn't to say he couldn't respect someone doing a banger job, though.

As they walked around with Rick in charge of picking mushrooms here and there while throwing bones and even a few carcasses with their blood drained out of his bag occasionally, Jake also decided to check his latest notifications.

Since the true death of Ell'Hakan, well over a year had passed, which wasn't a long nor a short period of time. It was enough to get some progress on the leveling front, but it had felt really damn slow.

To be fair, any leveling pace would feel slow after the way he'd been blazing through his profession before this brief lull. From helping Villy plot to kill Yip of Yore to slaying Ell'Hakan before having a meeting with the First Sage, Jake had done quite a lot of things to gain levels that many would consider out of the ordinary. So, returning to regular experimenting and crafting did feel like he was moving at a snail's pace.

Anomalous Soul and the fact he'd just gotten a lot of levels probably didn't help much, either. Maybe that's why, despite it being over a year of doing a lot of alchemy, Jake had gotten a grand total of... 1 level.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 311 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

Yeah, not the most impressive. Still, Jake wasn't that sad about it.

It didn't take long for Rick to finish gathering mushrooms, getting Jake two more full baskets for him to continue experimenting. In return, Jake also gave Rick some stuff he'd collected here and there that he didn't need, something the troll happily accepted.

Going up to his lodge, Rick followed him as the troll wanted to have a look at Jake's musa. After Rick had helped improve the soil after Jake's return from Nevermore, the troll had taken the musa under his wing and was carefully taking care of it, something Jake definitely appreciated.

Reaching the musa, Rick instantly went to inspect it. Jake saw him do this as Jake sighed.

"Hey, just gonna let you know right now, I've had a steady stream of banana thieves coming in and out of the valley," Jake said with a sigh.

Rick turned to look at him... before dropping the biggest plot twist imaginable.

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Chapter 1072: Approaching Its End

Jake was generally confident when it came to understanding monsters, especially those he'd known for a while. He didn't need them to speak regular words for him to understand their meaning, but sometimes, he did question whether he got things right. This was one such instance. Not because what Rick said was unclear, but because Jake simply refused to acknowledge what he said as the truth.

"Are you sure?" Jake asked again, hoping the troll would tell him he had indeed heard wrong and-

A confident nod shattered Jake's understanding as he simply stood there for a few seconds before sighing.

"How does that even make sense?" he asked desperately.

Rick proceeded to explain as he pointed to the musa while making grunting sounds. With every second of explanation, Jake got closer and closer to reaching acceptance before he finally couldn't deny it any longer.

That's also why he didn't say anything when Rick plucked a banana from the musa. He could only look on as he reflected on his prior actions and his pure ignorance of how the banana musa worked.

The troll gardener had revealed to Jake that, unbelievably so, plucking the bananas from the musa was actually a good thing. That the banana thieves had been helping the plant all along while Jake had been the one trying to actively harm it by preventing them. It was still hard to believe, but with Rick's explanation, he just had to accept it.

According to the troll, the fertilizer Jake had brought back was so powerful that the musa absorbed more energy than it could properly process. Thus, in order to not suffer the equivalent of drowning from being watered too much, it created more bananas to get rid of excess energy.

Jake was right that reabsorbing the bananas the musa grew was typically good for it. These bananas contained concentrated energies that the musa benefitted from getting back as recycled nutrients, but after Jake had fertilized the thing, reabsorbing the bananas was too much.

A part of Jake still wanted to argue, but he really didn't have a leg to stand on. Rick even said that during Jake's absence, he sometimes had one of his kids go up and take a few bananas off the musa to keep it healthy.

After all the explanations were done, Jake knew there was one thing he had to do. His face turned serious before looking straight at Rick. "Never share this with anyone else, alright?"

Rick tilted his head in confusion before Jake reiterated what he said. "This must be kept only between the two of us and the kids, alright? It's very important no one else finds out, or it could lead to disastrous consequences. That is to say, if anyone asks, taking bananas off the musa without permission is still not allowed, you got it?"

The troll still looked confused but nevertheless nodded, letting Jake breathe out a sigh of relief. If Carmen found out that her banana thievery had not only been justified but that she'd actually been helping Jake all along, he knew he would hear about it for the next century or two.

It was way better for Jake to instead bury the truth and make himself look like a nice and forgiving person by allowing them to still take bananas here and there.

With Jake having gotten a quick gardening lesson about the musa, Rick soon returned to his underground grove once more to tend to stuff. Jake waved the large troll goodbye, thanking him for taking care of the musa while also telling him to say hi to the kids from him. Even if Rick said he liked taking care of Jake's musa and that doing so gave him a lot of levels, Jake still felt grateful. Finding a good gardener could be hard, after all.

Alone once more, Jake went back down to his lab, which had already been repaired and even improved a bit by Hank. The builder had once more gotten some help from Arnold to put proper shielding around the glass bubble, meaning that the next time Jake had a minor concoction mishap, he hopefully wouldn't blow a hole all the way up to the surface.

With a good refill of death affinity mushrooms, Jake could get back to making his poison gas bombs. Alright, framing it like that did feel a bit weird, and he couldn't help but recall a time he felt uncomfortable poisoning someone and watching their body melt in front of him.

Now, he would only feel a sense of pride if his poison was able to melt a strong foe. In fact, if he could create a poison gas bomb that would make everyone hit by it melt, that would be pretty darn neat.

Getting back to work, Jake dove straight into it once more. He was still using the same approach as before, where he wanted to merge destructive arcane mana with the poison gas, and he felt confident he could make it work. It just took a lot of focus and experimentation to find the right balance and properly direct what the purpose of the arcane energy was in the concoction, besides making it so that arcane energy and the poison gas didn't clash. That was the most important aspect, as that would also mean that all his explosive attacks wouldn't inadvertently destroy a lot of his own poison, something he currently did with his mist from Wings.

The problem was that the destructive arcane mana mixed into the poison couldn't actually be destructive all the time, as that would make it consume the concoction, ultimately weakening the toxin. At the same time, it couldn't be too stable either. No, he needed it to be perfectly balanced so that the moment Jake made the outside layer of the bottle turn destructive, the destructive energies within the bottle would quickly do so, too. After the transformation to destructive, the mana could be channeled toward some purpose that he had yet to fully figure out.

He had mixed his arcane mana with other alchemical ingredients before, but this time was a lot different, as poison gas was quite, well, hard to handle. Which made sense, considering it was intangible. Still, it added another layer of challenge that Jake gladly took on.

When he didn't do alchemy, Jake meditated to recover resources. During these meditation sessions, Jake naturally studied the tome left by the First Sage, and he could confidently say that after over a year of studying, he still didn't even feel like he'd scratched the surface.

The level of knowledge the First Sage had imparted was simply in another realm compared to anything Jake was used to dealing with. The only things Jake possessed that were slightly comparable were Villy's drop of blood, the Puzzle Box of the Seeker, and the void lollipop Oras had gifted Jake. The last one he wasn't even trying to

understand, though, and the Puzzle Box was constructed to be slowly opened with a fuckload of levels of difficulty.

Meanwhile, the knowledge of the First Sage was entirely up to Jake to comprehend. He didn't even have a skill like Sagacity, which helped him glean knowledge from the drop of blood. No, it was all up to Jake, with no help at all.

Seeing as the difficulty was that extreme, any regular person would perhaps have been happy just getting some benefits from the book, but Jake was far from regular. The more he read and understood, the clearer it became that Jake could get absolutely massive benefits from the book.

Assuming he didn't fuck anything up, that is. Because it could also end with him only getting slight benefits.

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Upgrading skills was generally only viewed as a good thing. The only downside was if you wanted to upgrade a skill in a specific direction. One easy example to use was Jake's Powershot. His bread and butter. He had upgraded the skill to Arcane Powershot and truly made it his own, which had made the skill incredibly powerful for its rarity due to how well it suited Jake, but it also had some downsides.

If Jake learned of an upgrade path to Powershot from some supreme god, chances were he couldn't even learn it. Alright, he technically still could, but the road for Jake would be tens if not hundreds of times harder than someone who merely started out with regular Powershot before getting the Legacy.

It was a bit the same with Meditate. Jake had already upgraded it to Serene Soul Meditation, which did make Jake afraid he'd cut himself off from properly learning the First Sage's Legacy, but luckily, from what he'd read, it shouldn't be *that* hard to get the skill back on the First Sage track.

He wanted to make sure that when he did finally upgrade the skill, he did it right. Unlike Villy's Legacy skills, the Meditate skill was far more open-ended with way more branches leading in all directions. Perhaps that was part of the reason it had become a Legacy skill for pretty much everyone in the multiverse.

Its sheer versatility was a big factor for why Jake was confident that he could still adapt. From what he'd read so far, chances were he could keep upgrading the skill in the current direction he was already going, but Jake wanted more.

Jake was very greedy like that. He didn't just want a powerful Meditate skill... he wanted the best he could possibly get. He wanted the version that aligned as closely as

possible with the one the First Sage himself had possessed and used. In other words, he sought the Origin of the Legacy skill.

He also felt such a pursuit suited his Path best. He had the ability to make things return to Origin, so wasn't it only fitting he had skills that closely aligned with their original Origins? At least in this case, he believed it would.

Finally, there was one more reason he didn't want to mess up his Meditate upgrade... if he did, he had a feeling he wouldn't be able to uncover certain secrets related to the First Sage. The First Sage's book did have some things in common with the Puzzle Box in that he couldn't read all of it without first understanding what came before. It wasn't necessarily something Jake would call tests, but was instead more thresholds of comprehension Jake needed to overcome to keep reading.

If he wanted to, Jake was confident in upgrading Serene Soul Meditation to ancient rarity within the hour. Legendary rarity shouldn't be difficult either, and he reckoned that would, at most, take a week. He wasn't confident in getting any higher than that, though... which made any upgrades he could get now unacceptable.

Jake had resolved himself to ensuring that the next upgrade to Meditate he got would take him straight to mythical rarity. That was the minimum requirement. If he could get above even that, great, but Jake didn't have high hopes considering he was still only a C-grade.

Anyhow, between doing alchemy and studying the Legacy left by the First Sage, the days quickly passed. Jake rarely diverted from his usual schedule, only occasionally getting dragged into something by Miranda or deciding to take a break to play a bit with his Puzzle Cube.

He heard reports here and there about how the rest of the galaxy was doing, but he didn't pay it much mind. Miranda would tell him if something truly big happened, and getting involved in minor matters wasn't something anyone wanted. He had chosen to stay on top of some things, such as the Holy Church.

Jake was glad to see the Holy Church sticking to the terms of their surrender. According to Miranda, they hadn't caused any trouble, pulled back all their members, and thoroughly isolated themselves, awaiting evacuation.

What's more, Miranda had once more proven why putting her in charge of negotiations was a good idea, as the Church was providing compensation in the form of pretty much all the raw materials they could gather from their homeworlds. The way Miranda framed it, their labor to collect these materials was the least they could do when sitting around anyway, and as the planets didn't actually belong to the Church, anything gathered should be handed over.

This included nearly everything they had in storage, too.

Being a crafter part of the Holy Church did have to suck with such a lack of raw materials, but the rest of the galaxy benefitted as they couldn't get enough these days. Fully rebuilding everything would take years, and everyone in the entire Milky Way had gotten a great boost in Records from recent events that helped them all progress, heightening demand further. Follow current novels on [movel*fire*net](#)

Jake kind of felt like the only person not really progressing. Even as months passed and he made hundreds of uncommon gas grenades, he didn't get a single level. Not to say he wasn't making good progress, but not getting those sweet dingy sounds did bring some sadness.

He soldiered on, though, and soon enough, his struggles were rewarded. He'd pushed to increase the rarity of his gas grenades during all this time, and with this attempt in particular, he had a really good concoction going.

Everything was just going right, and as Jake tried to fully fuse the arcane affinity and poison gas while maintaining a perfect equilibrium, things finally clicked into place. The poison gas and arcane energies mixed, and with a big smile, Jake funneled all the gas into a pre-prepared bomb bottle.

After sealing the bottle, he inspected the product and saw that the gas within the bottle had a very dark green, almost black, color, and if one looked very closely, faint purple-ish sparks could be seen here and there. He knew before even checking the notification he'd succeeded.

You have successfully crafted [Arcane-Infused Rotbreath Poison Gas (Rare)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

The name had only changed by adding on Arcane-Infused, and as he identified the bottle, that was indeed the only significant change.

[Arcane-Infused Rotbreath Poison Gas (Rare)] – With every breath, life shall wane and destruction roams. Mixing potent death affinity toxins and arcane energies, a powerful poison gas has been concocted. This poison is primarily inflicted through breathing but can also easily penetrate the bodies of anyone in physical contact with it. If inflicted, it will spread through the body and cause necrotic damage to any tissue it inflicts, causing flesh to rot. Destructive arcane energies allow it to spread faster as it weakens the foe's tissue. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal.

Jake had considered for a while what kind of effects the destructive arcane energies should have once infecting someone, and he decided on going with something that would purely benefit the poison gas.

Trying to make the destructive arcane energy deal direct damage would be a total waste. The amount of damaging arcane energy Jake could pack into a bomb couldn't

even compare to a single arrow, which was why Jake decided to have the arcane energy take advantage of the fact it had infected someone alongside a poison.

Having the destructive energies weaken tissue was a relatively new idea he'd only gotten on recently. Rather than directly attacking the flesh, he instead used the energy to slightly weaken the concepts allowing tissue to resist the poison, creating an opening for the toxin to do its thing.

Now, there was still one huge elephant in the room... Jake had no idea how potent this effect would actually be. It was entirely possible adding his arcane affinity only provided a negligible increase in the damage done by the poison gas, but just having proven the concept was a massive success to Jake.

The fact he'd even gotten another level from said success definitely only made things better.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 312 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 307 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

He was getting closer and closer to the peak of C-grade, one little step at a time.

Jake considered starting another craft as he checked if any messages had recently arrived. Going through them, nothing really stood out until toward the end. Lillian had informed Jake that Caleb had returned to Earth to ensure he was back there by the time the system event ended, which also reminded Jake that it should be approaching its end.

Once the event ended, the universe would open back up, and Jake would definitely find himself busy once more. He would be able to go back to the Order or anywhere else in the entire multiverse, and while he definitely would be back to Earth to explore the solar system a bit, he knew he wouldn't be sitting still for long. Unless he was doing alchemy, of course.

Realizing this, and coupled with seeing Caleb was back, Jake made a decision as he packed up his cauldron and other ingredients before heading to take a shower. He could do more alchemy, yes, but honestly, this was probably the best period to visit and spend time with his family he would have for a while.

Jake also reckoned doing so would be healthy for him, as sometimes, even the Chosen of the Malefic Viper could do with a break... with maybe only a little tiny bit of First Sage reading and Puzzle Boxing here and there.

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Chapter 1073: A Careful Balance

After leaving Haven, Jake didn't take long to get to his destination. He only briefly stopped by Miranda to inform her he was going to visit his family. She seemed oddly happy to hear that and shooed Jake out of her office pretty quickly.

From there, the actual travel time was negligible, and soon enough, he found himself at the teleportation station placed right outside the city. Most of the larger cities on Earth had teleportation centers inside the cities themselves, but Jake had noticed a lot of the factions avoided this, likely for security reasons. Also, he wouldn't be surprised if some of them had their own off-the-books teleporters hidden here and there. In fact, he would be sorely disappointed if the Court of Shadows, a damn assassination agency, didn't have a bunch of safehouses and teleporters hidden here and there.

Anyway, the entrance to Skyggen looked much the same as always, except now it was no longer as hidden as it used to be. The Court of Shadows likely didn't feel the need to really hide themselves anymore now that the planet had been conquered by Jake. Instead, they were actively advertising their presence now.

That's not to say the defenses of the city weren't impressive. It was quite the opposite, as rather than relying on staying undetected, they had now chosen to use more traditional barriers to keep anyone unwanted out. Quite a few layers of these barriers, too, with a few of them having mana signatures reminiscent of shadow energy.

The best proof of their improvements was the fact that Jake chose to use the main entrance rather than try to sneak in. He'd naturally considered just trying to be all cloak and katars to surprise everyone with his sudden visit, but he quickly realized he wasn't confident in staying undetected.

Having a barrier able to see through Unseen Hunter was pretty damn impressive, but then again, if any faction knew all the ways to stay stealthy – and thus also how to detect those trying to stay stealthy – it had to be the top assassin faction of the multiverse. Chapters first released on **novel•fire•net**

Shortly after entering the city proper, Jake was honored by having the Judge himself be in charge of his welcome party. After the guard at the entrance realized who Jake was, he led him into a small private area close to the city's entrance. There, Jake waited before he saw his little brother appear seemingly out of nowhere as he emerged from a shadow.

“Neat trick,” Jake said.

“Thanks, took a really long time to learn,” Caleb said with a light smile. “It’s been a while, huh?”

Jake instantly detected the slightly accusatory tone as he defended himself. “Let’s not act as if you’ve been toiling away to try and get in contact with me either. In fact, haven’t you spent the majority of your time going on a tour of the galaxy?”

“I’ve been doing my job, yes, thank you for noticing,” Caleb nodded. “The Court has branches in many places, and we even have a few planets where we are the dominant force. It’s only proper that I at least pay them a visit and introduce myself, considering they’ll be working under me for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, last I heard, you’ve been stuck at home playing with alchemy that occasionally causes skybeams to break your ceiling.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. It happened once,” Jake said, crossing his arms, seeing no need to mention that if not for Arnold and Hank reinforcing the lab, everyone would have seen a few more beams.

“Some would say once is one time too many,” Caleb countered as he went closer and pulled Jake into a hug, seemingly tired of their usual bantering. “Good to see you again.”

“Thanks, you too. It sounds like things have been going well on your end,” Jake said, returning the hug before they quickly pulled apart again. “And, to properly defend myself, I would argue I’ve also been doing my job. At least, I reckon Ell’Hakan would agree I did.”

“Yeah, it did suck having to sit on the sidelines, but the higher-ups were insistent on not getting involved this time around. I guess it’s fine to tell you now, but Ell’Hakan and Iludar both attempted to hire the Court of Shadows to help them during this conflict. On numerous occasions,” Caleb explained with a sigh. “Most recently, even the Holy Church tried. They wanted us to provide security during your little negotiation. Some did want to take the jobs, but Umbra personally placed a ban on getting involved with either side. Outright denying our biggest client did cause some internal strife, but luckily, you handled the Church pretty quickly, making them all shut up.”

“You get the feeling Umbra also knew the Malefic Viper was going to win against Yip of Yore from the very beginning?” Jake asked, curious if other top gods beside the Primordials had just assumed Villy would win.

“In retrospect, I do,” Caleb nodded. “But I will confess, I don’t think she or anyone else was entirely confident who would win between you and Ell’Hakan. They seemingly knew a lot about him that made them confident he had a good chance, and from what I gathered, they believed he did have some advantages. A predominant theory was that

he wouldn't fight you unless the environment or situation was extremely advantageous to him... which I guess did turn out to be the case. They just miscalculated how strong you truly were."

"Well, in their defense, I can admit I also underestimated Ell'Hakan," Jake sighed. "Or, more accurately, the Celestial Child. At least he turned out to be a lot harder to kill than I'd first assumed."

"Hey, if it makes you feel any better, the estimated success rate for assassinating you was way lower than Ell'Hakan's," Caleb smiled cheekily.

"Oh?" Jake exclaimed with genuine interest. "When you say they're lower, that means they still think the chance is above zero percent. That makes you either a lot more competent or a lot worse at risk analysis than I would assume."

"If we go only by the power available to us in the galaxy, the chance is zero percent, rounded down, but if members from outside the universe get involved?" Caleb said with a slightly more serious tone. "While the success rate is still considered way too low, it isn't zero. I wouldn't really think about it too much, though. I have a hard time seeing them ever accepting a commission to take you out as things are now. If they were willing to do that, then what would have been the purpose of making me a Judge?"

"Now, wait a second," Jake lifted a hand. "I'm not saying it would be fine, but if a little commission was made... I'm not saying that would be terrible either."

"I'm not going to approve sending assassins your way to serve as practice," Caleb said in a resolute tone.

"It could be fun, though," Jake tried to argue.

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"I think you'd be the only one having fun while I'd just be feeding you experience points," Caleb sighed. "Anyway, moving on from that dumb topic, why have you come to Skyggen?"

"You're saying I can't visit my dear brother?" Jake smiled cheekily.

"No, I'm saying it's highly irregular for you to visit your dear brother," Caleb pointed out annoyingly accurately. "Which makes me automatically assume you are here for some bigger purpose. Or just to try and steal some of our more unique alchemical ingredients."

"Is it that hard to believe I'm just here to see family?" Jake said, acting a bit offended.

“Would you be mad if I said yes?” Caleb shook his head before smiling. “Mom’s gonna be happy. She’s worried a lot.”

Instantly upon hearing that, Jake felt bad. Deep down, he knew he was a kind of shitty son, even if his parents had told him to focus on his own life. He rarely visited his parents, and while he had spoken to them occasionally using Arnold-provided phones, it wasn’t the same as actually going to see them in person.

Moreover, the scarce conversations they had were always shallow. Jake felt weird talking about what he was doing with his life, and in truth, he felt that the less he talked about it with his parents, the better it was for them. He didn’t need them to know about multiversal conflicts or Jake’s thoughts on the deep mysteries of the system.

From what he’d gathered, they were also okay with Jake not sharing much. They likely also knew that whatever parental advice or insight they could provide didn’t really apply when it came to dealing with ancient gods or destroying planets. They were great when it came to asking about taxes or something like that, but seeing as Jake didn’t have to pay taxes because he was the dictator of the planet, that didn’t help much.

Finally... Jake had done and would continue to do a lot of things he *really* didn’t want to talk to his parents about. He had killed countless people, been involved in wars, and even blown up an entire planet. On a morality scale, Jake definitely didn’t think he tipped toward the “good” side... though he wasn’t entirely certain he wanted to be considered “good” according to the standards of the multiverse where the Holy Church was often viewed as a beacon of moral goodness.

Still, even if Jake didn’t have a lot to talk about regarding his life, he still wanted to visit and spend time with them. He was still fine with talking about the basics of what he was doing and keeping things empty of details for the most part. Also, while he did suck at staying in contact, they did talk here and there. Jake at least knew some basic things about their lives, such as the fact they had moved since the last time Jake visited.

“Can you lead the way to their... I wanna say manor from how mom described it?” Jake asked, wanting to give Caleb the chance to show him to his parent’s new home.

“Of course,” his little brother nodded as he motioned for Jake to follow. The two of them took to the air as Caleb also took the chance to explain a few of the changes the city had gone through recently.

Overall, it had expanded greatly. No longer needing to hide, the Court of Shadows wanted to show off their presence on Earth, which meant the city was also more open now than it used to be. No longer was it a requirement to be related to a member of the Court, and many freed slaves or recent immigrants had chosen to settle down in Skyggen.

Jake wouldn't be surprised if the city ended up being one of the largest on Earth in the future. It was also a city that was really easy to find from afar, as smack in the middle of the rapidly expanding settlement stood a towering all-black skyscraper, far taller than any of the other buildings around it. In fact, Jake wouldn't be surprised if it was the largest currently on Earth. Even from afar, Jake could detect powerful magic on it, and Caleb gladly explained what it was.

"That's my office building," he said with a smile. "Filled from top to bottom with administrative staff or others working for the Court of Shadows. Most of the training facilities are placed below ground."

"I gotta ask... seeing as the Court does assassinations, do you really have a lot of work these days? Like, enough to need that many people working on just administration alone?" Jake asked curiously, wondering if people were hiring hitmen to kill their annoying neighbors left and right.

"We have a few hits here and there, with Miranda being the biggest client by far," Caleb said before shaking his head. "But no, the majority of jobs are more akin to traditional mercenary work. Helping clear out monster-infested areas, defending places, and a surprising amount of search and rescue missions. You know, that kind of stuff. I'm fully aware that's not exactly what people would associate with the Court of Shadows, but we gotta take what we can in these early days. I have confidence that once things calm down, we will have more traditional work. People will always keep making enemies, and when it's no longer feasible to outright get rid of them yourself, that's where we come in."

"Why do I feel like I should be reporting you to the authorities?" Jake muttered.

"If it's any consolation, we will be working closely with the authorities. At least some of the time. I've come to learn that a lot of the work done by the Court of Shadows relies on walking a tightrope between illegality and remaining too useful to get rid of," Caleb explained. "That's why Judges are appointed. We are the ultimate authority in day-to-day matters, our job being to ensure what kind of jobs are taken and that the balance is maintained. If we fail, we also happen to be brilliant fall guys as the Court can point to us as having acted independently or been overly incompetent."

"Not gonna lie, that doesn't sound like a good gig," Jake confessed. "A lot of work, and all you get out of it is responsibility. Bah."

"Hey, it's not all bad. In case you're wondering, the penthouse on top of that huge tower is my home away from home. Maja and Adam also sometimes spend a few days there when I'm really stuck at work, so I can at least pop in occasionally."

"Sounds nice, I guess," Jake nodded, though he definitely wouldn't trade a nice home for having to do paperwork. "Say, how are Adam and Maja?"

“You’ll see for yourself soon. All I can say is that they grow quickly when this young. Too quickly for my liking at times,” Caleb just smiled, his tone a lot different when he spoke about family compared to work.

The two of them were silent for a while as they picked up speed, and soon enough, they arrived in a nice suburban area. In one of the corners of this area was a huge plot of land with several buildings on it, and rather than a residential property, Jake would be more inclined to call it a compound.

Without using Pulse, Jake knew this had to be where his family lived... because even from afar, Jake felt the most powerful set of protective barriers he’d ever seen on the planet, if not the entire galaxy. Caleb and the Court had truly gone all out there.

“Here,” Caleb said, getting back Jake’s attention as his little brother threw him a small token of sorts. “Infuse your energy into that, and it’ll work like a key. Should let you slip through the barriers.”

Jake nodded and did as Caleb said. Upon doing so, he also noticed that he couldn’t really have waited. Caleb had done something to “unlock” the token for registration, and if Jake had been just ten seconds slower, it would have crumbled the second he tried to infuse any energy. Jake could only guess this was protection against the token getting stolen, and while it wasn’t as good as using Soulbound items, it was pretty good.

Inspecting the property further before flying down, Jake saw there were a total of seven buildings, though only two of them looked like they were in daily use. One of them looked a lot like the house his parents had lived in the last time Jake visited, making him assume it was theirs.

Next to it was the one Jake assumed Caleb, Maja, and Adam usually lived in. He primarily based this on the two people he saw right behind the building in a large fenced-in yard.

He saw Maja sitting in a lawn chair, watching a boy run around swinging a stick in the air as if he was fighting invisible enemies. He was far faster than a pre-system kid, his swings powerful enough to kill a grown man by Jake’s estimation.

Beside him, Caleb couldn’t help but have a massive grin on his face as he watched this scene before turning to Jake. “Let’s head down there... oh, and I’m pretty sure Maja also said she was baking today, so maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Jake smiled and nodded. “Let’s hope she made some of her raisin cookies; they’re awesome.”

Caleb looked at Jake with a deadpan expression. “You know... often I question how my big brother became the Chosen of an evil snake god, but at other times, I fully understand.”

“Raisin cookies are good, and the hate for them is entirely unwarranted,” Jake argued with conviction.

“...actually, I guess I could reconsider accepting a job with your name on it.”

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Chapter 1074: A Very Dangerous Question

Caleb, perhaps to get away from Jake, who'd just spoken words many found controversial, teleported down before Jake. He disappeared like a shadow, only to reappear on the lawn below, right in the path of Adam's swing. His little brother already had a staff out as he blocked the blow with a big grin on his face.

Adam was surprised for a moment before he also grinned and really started swinging. Caleb responded by blocking and slowly backing away, acting as if he was being pressured. Jake watched for a while before he slowly lowered himself and landed beside Maja who was also keeping an eye on her husband and kid.

She was surprised when she saw Jake and turned to look him over. “Caleb didn't mention you would come for a visit... though it does explain why he's home early today.”

“Sorry if I ruined your calm afternoon,” Jake said as he pulled over a lawn chair for himself and sat down.

“I wasn't complaining,” Maja said with a smile. “You look the same as always.”

“Thanks, you too?” Jake answered, unsure.

Maja just chuckled and shook her head. “Hey, it's not a given. Took us all a little while to get over your eyes suddenly looking more like that of some beast than a human. Who's to say something else wouldn't have changed?”

“Oh, I chose to keep all the changes internal this time around. The latest one was mutating my soul a little,” Jake said casually.

“That sounds dangerous?” she asked with slight concern.

“Oh, it definitely is, but I had a good teacher helping,” Jake assured her.

“I take it you mean your Patron?”

"No... no, someone else," Jake said as he couldn't help but conduct a small anecdotal test. "Someone called the First Sage."

Maja just kept looking at Jake for a few moments after he said this before finally asking: "So, no need to keep me in suspense; who was this mysterious someone else?"

"I can't tell you," Jake replied honestly with a sigh.

"I promise to keep it a secret," Maja assured him jokingly.

"No, I mean that I literally can't tell you. I just tried but you aren't able to know," Jake spoke honestly.

Maja frowned as she saw Jake was serious before nodding with a severe look on her face. "It's probably best I don't know then. Forbidden Knowledge tends to be Forbidden Knowledge for a reason."

"... not gonna lie, I'm very surprised you know what Forbidden Knowledge even is," Jake muttered.

"Caleb spoke about the concept before. Apparently, he also knows some things considered Forbidden Knowledge. Or he used it as an excuse to keep secrets, and thinking about it, it really is the best excuse if you're trying to sneak around," Maja explained in a casual tone.

"While I do think Caleb is doing a lot of sneaking around, I hope it's only to kill people. If not, just give me a call, and I'll gladly help set him straight," Jake said, not joking in the slightest.

"Oh, I won't need to call you," Maja said with a look that made Jake truly hope Caleb would never be an idiot. For his sake.

"Either way, the offer is on the table, and my bow is ready," Jake said semi-jokingly as he kept watching Caleb and Adam, with Caleb seemingly really on the back foot now during their spar. "He's gotten a lot bigger since the last time I visited."

"Yeah... you know, it does feel a little weird," Maja said with a sigh. "I know it's something all parents say, but I feel like now it's more true than ever."

"I guess," Jake agreed as Maja continued.

"Other parents who had children before the system and now had ones after the initiation talk about how different it is. And not just how it's obviously different having a kid with supernatural abilities, but how fast it now feels like they grow up. In reality, it's still around the same, but it really doesn't feel that way," Maja said, continuing to observe

the lawn and the two goofballs fighting on it. "I suppose a year just isn't as long of a time as it used to be."

Jake slowly nodded, understanding what she was talking about. The timeframes the entire multiverse worked on were just on a different scale compared to before the system.

Everyone lived so much longer. Before, being a hundred years old likely made you the oldest person in a family, while now, being a hundred-year-old C-grade was still considered extremely young. Shit, considering all the time-dilation, Jake had already long surpassed any old-world records for age.

Yet a human child still grew at mostly the same pace. Mentally, there were even strong signs they grew faster than before. To a C-grade, spending a decade or two away on a hunting trip to grind levels wasn't odd at all, yet that was long enough to miss out on your child ever being, well... a child.

Jake couldn't truly say he related, but he could empathize with what his brother had to have felt like when away in Nevermore. Even now, it couldn't be easy. Going off-world for a few months was a short trip by the standards of the multiverse, yet it was long enough to make him miss so many new things. It only had to have been worse when Adam was even younger.

"It can't have been easy," Jake muttered.

"Hey, I had great help, and I'm one of the lucky ones with a good support system," Maja smiled before changing the topic. "Do your parents know you're back yet?"

"No, we came here first," Jake shook his head. "But it's fine, we have time. I took an unscheduled holiday."

"For how long?" Maja asked curiously.

"No set plan," Jake shrugged before he explained his logic for taking his break now before the universe opened back up. Maja instantly understood as she nodded along.

"Caleb also talked about things getting really busy after the event fully ends," she sighed. "You know, it would be nice if things could just calm down for a while. Like, really calm down."

"Agree," Jake nodded. He also preferred when he could do things entirely on his own timeline. Not to misunderstand, system events were damn awesome when it came to progress, and they often provided the best loot, as well as the chance to get titles and whatnot.

But Jake still preferred when he could do things at his own pace. Create his own quests to complete rather than have ones granted by the system. This was also because system events nearly always included a lot of other people, either with or against him.

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Meanwhile, something like his quest to kill a dragon was entirely his own. Jake could decide everything and properly prepare for the hunt. What's more, it would be entirely his own hunt from beginning to end. He already had a lot of plans for the actual hunt, and the fight was bound to be absolutely awe-

"Jake?" Maja returned Jake to the real world. "You looked like you were about to drool."

"Sorry, I was just lost in thought about something," Jake excused himself.

"Oh?" Maja asked teasingly. "Were you perhaps thinking about a certain Runemaiden?"

"No, I was imagining fighting a dragon," Jake corrected her without the slightest hint of jest.

"... yeah, I guess that makes sense, too," Maja sighed. "I honestly can't fault you for not being in a rush to get into anything serious. Caleb tries so hard to be here as much as possible, but even then, he's gone so much. I have a very hard time imagining you being any better."

"Can't risk getting into anything that takes away from my dragon hunting time," Jake answered with a joke, not really wanting to talk about that topic.

Maja caught on and changed the subject immediately. "You should go join Caleb."

"Wouldn't it be unfair if Adam and I teamed up on him?" Jake answered entirely seriously, getting a chuckle out of Maja.

"Guess we can both go if you want to keep things fair," Maja said as she stood up. Jake followed suit as he would have felt awkward if he'd kept sitting. Maja had likely caught on to Jake being unsure how to approach the father and son, and decided to give him a hand.

Jake was indeed nervous. He wasn't even sure if his nephew remembered him, and in either case, how was Jake supposed to act? He had no idea how to be around kids at all. He never had many friends before the system, much less any with children, and Caleb was the first family member in Jake's generation to have a child.

All of this is to say that Jake had never been around or interacted with children since he was a child himself... and he had already been very bad at interacting with other

children back then. He hadn't been as bad as his simulated self, Sim-Jake, but he had definitely been one of those kids other parents were hesitant about inviting to birthday parties.

Meeting with his nephew like this felt more nerve-wracking than when Jake stood on a crumbling planet facing the Celestial Child, but he tried to keep calm and at least act like a cool uncle. He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, the World Leader of the entire planet, and recognized as one of the most extraordinary talents ever seen in the multiverse. He could do this.

After hyping himself up a bit, Jake calmed his nerves as they approached Caleb, who was pushed up against a fence, acting entirely defeated, as Adam was laughing while pointing a stick at him.

"Show your father some mercy," Maja said as they got closer, getting the attention of Adam.

"I know he's just pretending," Adam answered in the tone one would expect from a prepubescent boy. He turned around to look at his mother, who was also when he spotted Jake, who stood beside her.

Jake instantly felt all the nervousness rush back as he focused all his willpower on making eye contact and giving his nephew a firm nod. "Hey, kid."

Fuck, Jake instantly exclaimed internally. Yeah, that definitely sounded pretentious, and he'd just given a small nod as a greeting. Plus, he'd made eye contact after just talking about how his eyes had changed to look way scarier than other humans. The last thing Jake wanted to do was scare off his nephew after not seeing him for so long.

About a full second passed as Adam just stared at Jake before his eyes opened wide. "The Arcane Hunter!"

Jake was immediately confused, but luckily, Caleb quickly filled him in.

"He's seen some recordings of fights here and there. Heavily edited ones. Due to the color of your arcane affinity, he began to call you the Pink Ranger, but I managed to save some of your dignity by having it changed to Arcane Hunter."

With that given context, Jake confidently nodded. "Some do indeed call me that."

Well, it was mainly the system that called him that, seeing as his class was a variant of Arcane Hunter. Of all the titles his nephew could call him, it definitely was better than Pink Ranger and probably also a lot better than Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Jake felt pretty confident that not many things related to the Viper were suitable for kids.

“Adam, what should you be doing when we have guests over?” Maja spoke, the kid instantly realizing as he threw the stick and hurried over.

“Hello, and welcome!” he said as he stretched out his hand to shake Jake’s. Seeing it felt oddly nostalgic as Jake remembered his parents being the same way. Perhaps it was old-fashioned, but in their family, it had always been considered normal to shake hands as a greeting, even when it was family that came for a visit.

Taking Adam’s hand, Jake smiled and shook it. “Thanks for having me. I also hope you aren’t being too hard on your dad. You know that’s my job, right?” This chapter is updated by novel●fire●net

“Dad is just acting. He’s a lot stronger than me!” Adam said in a loud voice. “Everyone says he’s the strongest in the city, too!”

Jake just kept smiling and nodding along as Adam seemingly had a realization.

“Uncle, you’re also super strong, right!?” he asked in a childish voice.

“I sure am,” Jake responded, full of confidence.

“Stronger than Dad?” Adam asked a very dangerous question with wide eyes as he stared up at Jake.

Instantly, he felt the gaze of Caleb land on him and he knew to be very careful with his next words. Jake focused before he just smiled and copied an answer he’d been given by someone else.

“Before we can even answer that, we need to know what being strong means,” Jake said, trying to sound wise. “You know rock, paper, scissors, right?”

Jake really hoped that little game hadn’t died post-system.

“Yeah,” Adam nodded, much to Jake’s relief.

“Well, who’s stronger? The paper, the scissors, or the rock?” Jake asked with a smile.

“Gun,” Adam just answered without any hesitation, throwing Jake off-course instantly. Luckily, he quickly adapted.

“You can keep adding things if you want, but there are also many things a gun can’t beat. A gun can’t beat a steel wall, right?” Jake tried to get things back on track.

“If it’s a really big gun...” Adam argued. Jake was quickly beginning to feel like he was losing an argument with a kid by having his own analogy used against him. Alas, he wasn’t bested that easily.

“Even the biggest gun will at one point meet a wall it cannot shoot through,” Jake shook his head. “And even if you have a really strong gun, which is more durable? The wall or the gun?”

“The wall, but walls can’t do anything.”

“Yet I would call a wall able to stop any gun super strong, wouldn’t you?” Jake said, though he was definitely beginning to get sidetracked with his analogy as he tried to get it back to an understandable level. “Both guns and walls can be called strong, but that doesn’t mean they’re the same. Think back to the rock, paper, and scissors. All of them are strong against one of the others while weak to another. People are, in many ways, the same.”

Adam seemed to try and process what Jake said... only to return to his original question. “Does that mean you’re stronger than Dad? Like... are you rock and he’s scissors?”

The true answer to that question was naturally yes. Jake was far stronger than Caleb, but Jake couldn’t come out and say that unless he wanted a very miffed little brother. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t want to outright lie, which is why he went with something down the middle.

“We are both strong in different ways. That’s how power works,” Jake spoke. “But if you’re asking if I can beat him in a fight? I don’t know. We’ve never fought seriously, and I don’t see why we ever would.”

“Why not fight to find out?” Adam kept asking, seemingly insistent on knowing if Jake could beat up his dad for some reason.

“You have seen some of the recordings of fights, right?” Jake asked.

“Yeah! They’re super cool!” Adam nodded enthusiastically.

“Well, have you ever seen how everything around the fight looks afterward?” Jake asked before explaining. “When really strong people fight, it’s not good for everything around it. If your dad and I were to fight super seriously, it would get really dangerous for everyone else because we’re both so strong. Besides, brothers shouldn’t fight seriously as that can get incredibly dangerous, and if we don’t fight seriously, how can we really know who’s stronger?”

Adam got quiet after hearing Jake’s explanation before he finally nodded. “I think I understand... but how come Dad can fight bad guys without it being dangerous or breaking things?”

“If you’re a lot stronger than the one you’re fighting, you can win so fast it’s not even a real fight,” Jake explained.

His answer made Adam's eyes light up as he nodded. Caleb also threw Jake a thankful gaze. However, it looked like Adam had more he wanted to ask. Luckily, Maja saved them. She had gone into the house during their silly conversation and had now returned holding a board with drinks and food on it, including a bowl with something inside, giving off a recognizable smell.

"You guys should come over and have something to drink after such a hard fight," Maja said as she placed down the board. The three boys in the yard quickly made their way over as Jake felt like he'd just been saved from more questions he'd have a hard time answering. He still felt very nervous about what impression he made on his nephew... but then something happened.

Adam ran over to the table, and when he saw what was inside the bowl, he yelled excitedly.

"You made the ones with raisins! Those are the best!"

At that moment, Jake felt like perhaps he could get along really well with his little nephew.

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Chapter 1075: Truly Relaxed

After the initial nervousness, things calmed down as Jake sat down and had something to eat and drink with Caleb and company. This included the extremely tasty raisin cookies, of course. During it all, Adam kept asking a lot of questions, but luckily, they weren't the dangerous sort. At least most of them weren't.

Jake gladly answered most as doing so mainly involved telling tales of his exploits and the many fights he'd been in. He did try to keep things relatively kid-friendly, but he came to learn that Adam was far from ignorant of a lot of things. In that sense, he was a lot like Jake and Caleb themselves, who definitely saw a lot of movies they probably shouldn't have when his age. Adam was also clearly a big fan of fighting, if his beatdown of Caleb wasn't a clue to that, and his brother gladly shared more about some of the recordings he'd seen of Jake's fights.

The number of recordings they had were naturally limited, but they did have a few, including the one where he fought the Prima Guardian. Jake also came to learn that recording things like that was considered standard practice, as besides doing

assassination work, the Court of Shadows was also one of the premier information brokers of the multiverse.

Caleb assured Jake that the Court barely had any actionable information on him, though. If one wanted solid data on Jake and how powerful he was, Nevermore was the place to go, assuming the Wyrmgod was willing to sell. Besides that, what the Court was in possession of didn't give away anything that wasn't already common knowledge.

Jake was a bit surprised when he learned that the Court of Shadows had some recordings originally taken by Ell'Hakan or the people loyal to him, including the one where he'd actively shown off Fang of Man. These recordings had been copied and sold by people who wanted some quick cash, and the Court had gladly accepted.

Apparently, this recording was Adam's favorite, as Jake looked really cool in it. Jake wouldn't argue against that, of course, though he would say he always looked cool. In fact, he had a lot of fights where he'd been way cooler, many of which he gladly shared with Adam.

He kept it to the times he fought monsters, though, and Adam was very engrossed as Jake spoke of the time he fought a space magic panther to kill his very first C-grade.

Like that, the day rapidly passed, with Jake even sneaking in some mana training by summoning arcane projections to show Adam visual representations of some of his battles, which somehow ended up with Jake summoning an Adam-sized arcane construct for him to fight against.

Jake said fight, but it was mostly Adam just whacking away at the thing as Jake tried to properly control it. He learned that fine-motion controls were pretty freaking difficult, especially when he had to be careful not to hurt Adam. Not that he had to be overly careful, as Jake wasn't even sure his arcane construct could injure Adam unless he purposefully made it blow up or something. And even then, it was doubtful that would be enough.

Caleb had acquired several defensive items for their entire family to help keep them safe. Most of them were auto-activated barriers and shields that would activate should an attack deal a certain percentage of their heal in damage, and from what Jake knew, those items definitely weren't cheap. It wasn't easy to make something that could provide power without relying on the person using it, though there was way more leeway for defensive items compared to offensive ones. In fact, having a non-self-made item capable of dealing more damage than your best skill was borderline impossible. Even if Jake gave Maja one of his poisons to put on a kitchen knife, it would barely do anything, while that very same bottle and knife combo in Jake's hands could kill high-tier C-grades.

Anyhow, the afternoon passed with them playing until dinnertime approached. Jake felt like it had been a good decision to stop by and only spend the day with Caleb, Maja,

and Adam before also going to see his parents. It allowed them to have some good quality time without Jake also having to think about his old folks.

Alas, it was time to finally pay them a visit, as when evening approached, Maja and Caleb began preparing to head next door, making Jake ask:

“You still eat dinner with Mom and Dad every night?”

“Not every night, but pretty often,” Maja answered. “Though it is nearly every night when Caleb is gone.”

“Understandable,” Jake nodded in understanding as he could see why Maja would get a bit lonely with his brother not around. Also, seeing as they were leaving soon, he also got ready to head over. His preparations were mainly of the mental variant, though.

Jake also didn’t question why they were even eating dinner or having these afternoon snacks in the first place, even if it could easily be viewed as wasteful in the context of the wider multiverse.

All the adults involved didn’t have to eat anymore. Even Maja and his parents had reached D-grade by now, making eating entirely unnecessary. The only one who still had to eat was Adam, but even he didn’t need to eat as much as before, though from what Jake knew, even humans benefitted from food when trying to reach their “natural” grade while growing up.

To clarify, seeing as Maja had been pregnant when the system arrived, Adam didn’t have a higher natural grade. Without training, he would naturally max out his race in F-grade, more accurately, around level 10 in F-grade, which also happened to be when Jake and everyone else had evolved to F-grade from G way back then – a grade Adam had entirely skipped.

Humans like Adam would naturally grow to level 10 around the teenage age, though there were instances it could get higher. Around the teenage age was then when one could get classes and professions, and from there, they would level just like Jake and everyone who had done the Tutorials. Naturally, without any race levels gained until their profession and class had some growth first.

Jake hadn’t done a lot of research on how human children tended to grow naturally, and truthfully, he knew a lot more about monsters in that regard, but he was at least aware of these basic things. He was sure Maja and Caleb knew a lot more, but it didn’t really seem appropriate to discuss.

Anyhow, with all their preparations done, the four of them left the house to make the long trek all the way next door. Through his sphere, Jake saw his mom and dad already inside, with his mom setting the table as his Dad was busy at the grill. As mentioned,

eating wasn't something any of them needed, but it was still considered an extremely popular social activity.

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It was even considered pretty normal to go out to eat within the Order of the Malefic Viper. Of course, with nutrients no longer being the goal of food, the focus had entirely shifted to taste and texture. Food was all about enjoyment, and that was it. In many ways, it was no different from any other form of entertainment, and the more long-lived many people became, especially when they didn't pursue progress anymore, the more they sought entertainment. The entertainment industry was massive everywhere, and in many ways, Earth was behind as they'd been so busy handling system events, yet even they had plenty if one bothered to look, and Jake was sure the general culinary field had developed plenty over the last few years.

With all this in mind, Jake was looking forward to his dad's grill work, as he had no doubt only gotten better since the last time Jake had any of his food, and as he didn't need to consider calories or making anything healthy, he could go as ham with the barbecue sauce as he wanted.

So, with great expectations, they arrived at their door. Maja knocked, and with his sphere, Jake saw his mom rush to the door.

"You're a bit early; Robert is still—" Jake's mom began as she opened the door but quickly stopped when she spotted both Jake and Caleb there. According to Maja, Caleb was also not supposed to be home today, meaning his mom had gotten a double surprise.

Jake was about to say something as his mom turned her head and yelled: "Robert! Jake and Caleb are also here!"

Only a second later, Jake's dad yelled back: "Do they want sausages or ribs? I think the roast is big enough even with two more, but I can throw on a second one..."

His mom turned to Jake and Caleb, the Judge answering first. "I'll have whatever."

"Ribs, for sure," Jake said as he was already looking forward to the meal.

"Caleb wants those chili sausages, and Jake wants ribs!" his mom yelled back before she finally properly turned to address Jake. "You're lucky we got extra from the butcher just yesterday. You could have given us a ring and said you'd come!"

Jake scratched the back of his head as he smiled. "I wanted it to be a surprise?"

"He probably just decided impulsively to visit, not leaving him any time to call ahead," Caleb took a dig at Jake, being entirely accurate with his assessment.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jake’s mom smiled as she walked over to Jake. “Now come here!”

She pulled him into a hug and gave him a good squeeze as Jake just smiled and returned it. “Sorry that it’s been so long.”

“It’s fine,” she said in a comforting voice. “Your father and I both know that you’re busy. We’re both adults; we can take care of ourselves.”

“Still,” Jake protested, but his mom gave him a look that made it clear she didn’t wanna hear anything more about it. Obliging, Jake shut up as he instead accepted her invitation to enter the nice little house. The source of this content is [movel*fire*net](#)

Walking in, he inspected the place a bit while his mom was busy doting on Adam, who’d run up to his grandma after Jake and she had spoken. The house was pretty simple and looked very modern, and it was definitely an upgrade to where they lived before.

It was also built extremely well, and Jake even saw that beneath the house was a bunker of sorts. The main structure itself was also heavily reinforced to the level Jake doubted a single arcane arrow barrage would be enough to destroy it... assuming he’d even gotten past all the barriers defending the entire property, of course. Overall, Jake was definitely satisfied with the level of security. It was thorough and powerful, yet not intrusive or disruptive to his parent’s lives.

Looking around, Jake spotted something. On the wall, he noticed objects he hadn’t expected to see. His eyes opened wide as he walked closer to properly inspect a few pictures hanging there. He saw how they were slightly damaged at their edges, and he couldn’t help but wonder if they were real. He didn’t have to wonder long as his dad walked into the room to greet the newly arrived guests and saw what Jake was looking at.

“Caleb had some people scour an area that resembled where we used to live, and they found those as well as a few other small things,” Robert, Jake’s father, spoke.

What Jake was looking at was a set of pictures on the wall. One of them showed Jake and the rest of his family at a Christmas gathering a few years before the system, while another was one of their dad chasing Jake and Caleb with a water gun when they were both kids. The final picture was one from Maja and Caleb’s wedding day, depicting his parents with the bride and groom.

Jake couldn’t help but smile as he saw these pictures, and a flood of emotions washed over him. “I’m glad they found them.”

“Me too,” his dad said as he walked over and stood beside Jake. “How have you been recently? I heard a lot of things happened with that other World Leader who also attacked the planet those years ago.”

"It's all been dealt with," Jake said in a firm tone, his dad looking at him with some concern as Jake shook his head.

"Dad, It's all fine. Better now than it has been for a long time. There's no competition left in the galaxy worth mentioning, and things are rapidly stabilizing. I believe that the people I have entrusted to handle everything actually have the situation under control, and trust me, they're way more competent than I am at what they're doing. Even if they run into a snag anyway, I'll figure it out."

"As long as you don't overwhelm yourself," his Dad said with a sigh.

"I'm pretty good at delegating," Jake smiled in response. "Perhaps a bit too good at times."

The two of them spoke a bit more as they looked at the pictures. Meanwhile, his mom ushered Caleb and company into the house and toward the backyard, where the food was cooking.

As the four of them went out there, Jake heard his mom yell again. "Weren't you gonna bring more out for the grill? Also, you are keeping an eye on it, right?"

"Oh, right," Robert was reminded as he threw Jake a look. "Meet you outside in a bit."

Jake just chuckled and went out the back door. However, he hadn't even gotten fully outside before his mom stopped him. "Jake, could you bring plates and utensils for you and your brother?"

"Sure," Jake responded, turning on his heel and heading to the kitchen. His dad saw him walk in, having heard what his wife said as he spoke up.

"The plates are in the--"

Jake had already opened the cabinet with the plates by the time he said it, and with a flick of his hand, a drawer also opened as two pairs of knives and forks floated up from it.

"I have a lot of Perception," Jake just said, his dad not even questioning anything as Jake headed outside and set the table. As he placed things down, he couldn't help but notice Caleb staring at him and shaking his head.

"What?" Jake asked.

"I'm just wondering who else in the multiverse could just tell you to do something mundane like setting a table. Who would even dare at this point, much less who could actually make you just do it without question," his little brother said.

“Just because he’s the World Leader doesn’t mean he stops having manners,” their mom shot back.

“Touché,” Caleb said while raising his hands in surrender, not daring to argue with their mother either.

Jake just smiled as his dad soon joined them with way more meat than what was probably necessary. It didn’t take long before dinner was served, and Jake had the damn best spareribs of his life. The fact Jake’s diet usually consisted of plants or mushrooms, having actual food was so good in comparison.

As Jake sat there eating, surrounded by his family, he couldn’t help but realize how... normal it felt. It had been years since he’d seen many of them, yet after only a few minutes, it felt natural for him to be there. It was as if he’d just returned after a semester at university.

He smiled as he sank his teeth into yet another rack of spareribs, feeling truly relaxed for the first time in a long while.

Yeah... this was a good idea.

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Chapter 1076: Happiness

Days passed as Jake had his first real holiday in a long while. In the large compound his parents lived in, several empty buildings were present, one of which was specifically constructed for Jake to live in should he visit.

Having his own space was nice as it allowed him to disconnect if he wanted some alone time. Seeing as no one – besides Adam – had to sleep, there weren’t any natural points to stop a visit, and the only reason many had daily routines was because of before the system. Same as traditions, such as eating dinner.

Jake didn’t have to seek out a lot of alone time, though, as it wasn’t like everyone else could just hang out with him all the time. His parents hadn’t reached D-grade simply by chilling at home but actually worked in the civilian sector of the Court of Shadows.

Debra, his mother, had been a bookkeeper all her life. It turned out that even in this new world, having a solid understanding of an organization’s economics remained super

important. She also worked with procurement, as the Court of Shadows didn't produce many things themselves but had to use outside merchants.

Meanwhile, his father, Robert, used his skills as a former architectural and structural engineer to help build and design many areas in the city of Skyggen. He wasn't like Hank, who was mostly in charge of actually constructing things but was more of a planner who made the blueprints. He'd even been one of the people working on the giant tower in the middle of the city.

The two of them working meant that Jake's assumption of them just staying at home all day wasn't quite accurate. While they had mostly stayed at home the prior times he'd visited, this was still considered a hectic time, and neither wanted to let down their coworkers by taking an impromptu holiday to spend time with their visiting son. They did reduce their work hours a bit, but not by too much.

Even Maja usually worked, but she had taken time off during Jake's visit. Probably because of the timing of her system initiation, Maja had gained a profession focused on helping children develop, one she'd gladly embraced to help Adam.

As her son grew older, Maja began working by helping to care for other children in the city whose parents were busy at work or, more often, away on missions.

The kindergarten, as Jake could classify it, was a lot bigger than Jake had expected it to be. Then again, he really shouldn't have expected any less business. Earth had been one of the more peaceful places in the universe for a long time, and with peace came normalcy. As Maja explained it, people had been very reluctant to have children in the early days after returning from the Tutorials.

No one knew what the future would bring, and everything was rapidly changing. There was no stability, no "everyday life" for people to rely on. Coupled with this and the fact that contraceptives were as easy as either party not really feeling a pregnancy, birth rates had fallen to effectively zero for a good while.

Quite a few years had passed since then, and things had really begun to pick up again. It also wasn't as if there weren't some births, meaning Adam at least had some peers. Peers he spent quite a while with, as he was doing something else Jake had entirely neglected to consider:

School.

Even with the advent of the system, children were still forced to go to school. What they learned had naturally shifted quite a bit, but some things were still good to teach. Sure, the system made learning easier; you still had to learn basic things like math and reading, but certain magical concepts were also covered now to help them read some of the most common runes and formations. Also, a huge aspect of going to school was natural socialization and allowing children to interact and form relations with their peers.

Jake did wonder why Maja didn't work at the school but had instead chosen to work with younger kids than Adam, and in her words:

"What child wants their mom working at the school? Caleb and I both agreed it's better to give him at least one space where no one from his family is constantly hovering. One place where he can just be a kid. I will admit it's a bit nerve-wracking, but we can't go full helicopter parents, now, can we?"

An answer that made a lot of sense if Jake thought about it a little more.

Either way, with Maja being the only one with actual time off, Jake naturally ended up spending a lot of his time with her, as she and the rest of his family gladly introduced Jake to aspects of the system Jake had never genuinely interacted with much before.

Jake knew it intellectually, but it was only when he saw it more closely that he understood just how massive the entertainment industry was after the system. The only entertainment Jake had really interacted with was eating tasty stuff, arena fighting, and drinking, but that barely scratched the surface.

The system had given new life to artists of all forms. Jake was especially surprised by musicians, and he even attended a concert performed by Matteo, one of the top assassins of the Court of Shadows, who apparently was also a well-known pianist.

Just walking down the commercial streets of Skyggen, Jake saw so many things that he would classify as useless if one pursued progress. Clothing stores sold clothes not for stats or defenses but for pure aesthetics. Bookstores selling fiction and other works of entertainment, with not a single useful tome on magic in sight. He even found a lot of reproductions of old books from before the system, making Jake consider the copyright implications of that.

Out of everything Jake saw, his favorite new discovery was the post-system animation industry. Through magic, new forms of animation films were created and projected both in two and three dimensions. Apparently, doing so was pretty damn difficult, making it something several of the more powerful mages in the Court of Shadows chose to pick up to practice magic while also leveling their professions.

To be clear, his favorite form of entertainment remained good food and – more importantly – good drinks. Well, alright, those were his favorite forms of non-progression entertainment, as the best time was still to be had when fighting a powerful foe with his life on the line.

Alchemy could also be pretty damn fun, especially when he was working on a really hard new project. Perhaps it all boiled down to the fact that nothing could beat that feeling of pure bliss after either defeating a powerful foe or finishing a hard project... but Jake realized he was definitely weird in that regard.

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Anyhow, Jake was thoroughly impressed with how damn quickly Earth had adapted to this new world. He had always believed that humans were innately industrious to some extent, and he felt proven right, seeing as most people tended to keep themselves busy one way or another.

Thinking more about it, as the World Leader, learning more about the planet he was supposedly the leader of was probably a good idea. Jake fully realized how disconnected he was from the average person. Everyone still had normal everyday troubles; their lives were now far more normal than they had been for a long time.

Everything and everyone had kind of just slowed down a bit. Even if this time with the system event soon ending was being seen as hectic, it was nothing compared to how everything was shortly after the integration.

What's more, people were far less worried. The average person didn't know much about the conflicts between Chosen and whatnot, but no one had been able to escape the constant system notifications warning about new events coming up.

They also couldn't avoid all the internal conflicts of the planet. There were constant restrictions on trade and travel, people were whispering about new fights breaking out here and there, and with the local leaders in a state of tension, it bled down to the average human just trying to live their own lives.

Now, all of that was effectively over. There were no system events threatening to take all the powerful people away from the planet, with no one knowing how many would return. No one questioned who the leader was anymore, and if they did, there was trust that the World Council would handle it promptly. Even something as simple as monster attacks was a thing of the past for any settlement of even average size.

With everything slowing down, so did the progress of the average Earthling. Peace and calm made people relax and not desperately strive for power anymore. It bred contentment, leaving only those who truly strove for power due to internal motivation to continue in the pursuit.

From Jake's point of view, this new status quo wasn't good or bad. He realized those who'd embraced this peace lived in entirely separate worlds from himself and the people he usually interacted with. Jake and everyone else he deemed his peers didn't seek power because they felt like they had to. They did it because they wanted to.

As Jake reflected on how much Earth had changed, he also began to understand why some factions of the multiverse purposefully remained in conflict with one another nearly constantly. While internal motivation was all well and good, not everyone made it

their primary driver to get stronger, and it wasn't even necessarily the best motivator—at least not until one began to approach the peak of mortality.

That's why they needed external motivation... and it was hard to find a better than the fear of being annihilated by an enemy faction.

The Endless Empire and Automaton Legion had been at war since the very first Era, and Jake didn't doubt this had both tremendously hurt and benefited them. The other faction looming over their heads made them never slow down their progress, as they never entered a state of peace. This definitely had to raise the power of their average members, as if they ever fell behind, the other faction could get an advantage.

A similar – albeit far less extreme example – was the Risen versus the Holy Church. They had battlefields with ongoing skirmishes that had gone on for who knows how many years. A conflict like this affected the entire organization as it put pressure on crafters to keep supplying the military effort, as well as the conscription of new fighters who signed up to fight in the war.

On perhaps the smallest scale, most monsters constantly felt outside pressure to get stronger due to the environment they lived in. To be weak meant you were prey, and the only way to avoid being hunted down was to become the predator. Yet Jake also suspected that if these monsters who'd struggled for survival their entire lives reached C-grade, got a humanoid form, and joined a peaceful civilization, many of them would also entirely stall their progress. They would embrace the peace and quiet, likely finding more happiness in that.

And perhaps that was more important than anything else; finding happiness. Jake found happiness in growing stronger, but that didn't mean others did.

After spending a few weeks with his family, all of this reflection birthed some questions and doubts that Jake finally decided to address. On a late night, when Caleb was busy working atop the large skyscraper in the middle of Skyggen, Jake stopped by for a chat. After only a bit of convincing, he got his little brother outside, and the two of them soon found themselves standing overlooking the large city spanning beneath them, some construction visible at the outskirts as Skyggen was still expanding.

"What did you want to talk about?" Caleb asked, having definitely sensed that this was something he wanted only the two of them to hear.

"Have you ever thought about the future?" Jake asked as he looked at his brother. "And I'm not just talking about ten or even a hundred years. I'm talking about the future a thousand or maybe even ten thousand years from now."

Caleb got quiet as he also stared out at the city before sighing. "A lot more than you have, I reckon... and I know where you're going with this." The latest_episodes are on the novel★fire★net

“Have you talked to them about it?” Jake questioned with a frown.

“Yeah, I have,” Caleb nodded. “Mom and Dad... they aren’t cut out for this world the two of us live in. Not really. I tried to bring up the topic several times and in several different ways, but at this point, I’ve just accepted it. They aren’t fighters, and I don’t think we can make them fighters either. Even if we somehow could, would we really want to turn them into something they never wanted to be in the first place?”

Jake was quiet as he considered Caleb’s words for a while, as well as everything he’d seen over these last few weeks. The average person wasn’t a fighter. The average person wasn’t suited to get powerful. But, perhaps more importantly, the average person wouldn’t gain any happiness from being powerful.

To them, power was just a way to avoid being miserable. Jake compared it to people who either worked to live or lived to work. His parents had always been the types of people who clocked in and out on time, did their jobs, and found meaning in their lives when not at work.

Jake had been the same way before the system... and in retrospect, he’d been miserable. He’d entirely lacked any drive or motivation to improve himself or his life. Everything had just been a chore he had to go through to keep living, hoping that, one day, things would get better.

And things did get better for him. A lot better. To go back to the analogy, Jake was now the type of person who lived solely to work. He was that high-energy entrepreneur who loved waking up every day and seeing things improve. The type who sucked at taking time off to do anything else.

But, he also realized that in the same vein that the average worker in a new start-up didn’t have the same constant passion and drive as the founder, not everyone in this new world wanted to constantly pursue power.

Doing so wouldn’t bring them any happiness. It was a chore to them, something they had to do as a means to an end. They only wanted enough power to pursue the things that would truly bring them joy and nothing more. This was the average person... and besides being the parents of Jake and Caleb, their mom and dad were very much average.

“I know it may be hard to relate,” Caleb spoke again after a while. “Trying to get more powerful just feels natural to you. Like it’s just what you’re meant to do. But Mom and Dad aren’t like that, and I don’t want to force them into being like that... and I know that neither do you.”

“Do you know if they made any progress with their classes?” Jake questioned.

“Pretty much none, and as I said, neither desire to either,” Caleb shook his head.

“Even with all the Records they have... if they don’t level their classes...”

“C-grade isn’t feasible,” his little brother sighed. “And... I think we just have to accept that, no matter how reluctant we are. Just like how they let us decide how we lived our lives and pursued our happiness... we should allow them to do the same... even if it does suck in many ways.”

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Chapter 1077: A Wonderful Place

Jake digested Caleb’s words, agreeing with his statements... both that it sucked and that they should let their parents decide how they wanted to live. Jake was a big believer in freedom, and it would be too hypocritical even for him if he forced his parents to do something they didn’t want to, only to make himself feel better.

Caleb noticed Jake’s look and gave him a comforting smile. “It may change in the future, even if I doubt it. There are a lot of years before their status of only being D-grades is relevant, and they’ll keep making some progress for a good while more. It also isn’t impossible for them to evolve more with just their professions. It happens all the time, even if it’s harder.”

“Yeah,” Jake nodded. “Say... how about Maja?”

Maja and his parents felt very much in the same boat. The three of them were people Jake didn’t feel fit in with the new world after what some referred to as the system apocalypse. Although she was a bit better, he still had a hard time seeing her finding a Path that would allow her to progress alongside Caleb and perhaps even Adam in the future.

“That...” Caleb said, looking hesitant for a bit before resolving himself. “Maja changed her mind even if she still isn’t keen on killing things.”

“How did you manage to convince her?” Jake asked with surprise while also wondering why Caleb had hesitated to answer.

“I didn’t,” Caleb sighed. “I tried and failed in several ways, and I’m not gonna lie, I got kind of desperate. Mind you, this was a good while ago... but I reached out to the Augur. He talked to her, and afterward, she seemed resolved and even began actively learning more about magic in her free time. Summoning magic, even. A notoriously difficult school, but she’s making great progress, and apparently, studying law is useful when

learning summoning magic somehow, so I guess having her help with contracts and whatnot in the early days of the Court didn't just help me, but her future Path. She still has a lot of levels to catch up on before she can actively fight anything close to her level, but any progress is good progress in my book. Plus, I think summoning suits her. In that way, she won't have to fight directly but can take a more planned approach."

"Jacob, huh..." Jake muttered as he frowned slightly. He was happy to hear that his sister-in-law had found a Path, but with Jacob having helped her, it begged the question: "Say, did he also-"

"He did," Caleb confirmed. "Now, don't get mad. I know you had – likely still have - quite a few issues with him, and I'm not a massive fan of the Church either, but Jacob is still an Augur of Hope. He is all about helping people find their Paths, so I reckoned if anyone could convince them, it would be him. Or, you know, at least give me some tips on how to convince them."

"And what did he say?" Jake asked, not as annoyed at no one having told him about this meeting as he was curious about what Jacob had found out.

"What you already know," Caleb answered bluntly. "They have no desire to reach for power anymore. They still want to at least not be burdens to you and me. That's also why they insisted on working despite not really having to. But at the same time, we all know that they could never reach a level of power where they won't be considered weak."

"It's not really about being weak or strong but that evolving to C-grade means that-"

"They know, Jake," Caleb sighed and shook his head. "Of course, they know. Mom and Dad aren't stupid."

"I never said they were," Jake protested.

"You kind of are," Caleb said in a sharp tone. "Do they fully understand everything being the World Leader and Chosen of the Malefic Viper entails? No, but they understand that the two of us – especially you – aren't regular people by any metric. You, especially, are a multiversal entity at this point and undoubtedly the most influential person in the entire galaxy, if not the universe. Think a little. Do you know why they never bug you about not calling? Why they don't complain when you don't visit? Because they don't want to burden you. They don't want to impede your Path in any way... and the best way of doing that is to stay out of your life and only have you engage on your own terms. It's their way of helping, no matter how small or insignificant it seems."

Jake didn't immediately answer. He already strongly suspected some of what Caleb said, but hearing it so bluntly stated still meant Jake needed a moment to think. A moment long enough for Caleb to keep talking.

“Jake... D-grade or C-grade, the difference in lifespan is marginal compared to an S-grade, much less a god. They also know that. Mom and Dad aren’t under any illusion that they’ll outlive either of us, and truthfully, I don’t think they’d want to. They are already more than pleased with how long they’ll be able to live now... in fact, I heard Mom talking about it, almost feeling like too long. Do you understand what I mean?”

“That we shouldn’t try to forcefully drag them into our world more than they already are,” Jake muttered. Follow current novels on *novel~fire~net*

Caleb nodded. “Doing so would only make them miserable. Instead, allow them to at least help in their own way. Let them be a place you can return to when you want some peace and quiet. An escape from our world, if you will.”

Jake was silent once more as he stared out at the buzzing city where night and day barely mattered. Closing his eyes, he let out a big sigh before speaking. “Do you reckon Mom and Dad are back from work yet?”

“I have a strong feeling you could confirm if they were home quicker than it would be to ask me about it... but yes, they are,” Caleb said in a lighter tone than before.

“Then let’s go,” Jake said with a light smile as he turned around. “You still have playing cards around, right? I haven’t beaten you three in Hearts for what feels like at least a century.”

Caleb returned his smile. “As long as you don’t cheat using that Bloodline of yours.”

“Not how that works,” Jake shook his head. “But do keep any reflective surfaces away. I still have very high Perception.”

With those words, the two of them headed off home... Jake feeling an odd sense of calm compared to before. He’d had a lot of thoughts and worries about his parents and what the future would hold, but he realized now that he was only doing them a disservice.

Rather than worry about some long-off future, it was better to focus on the now and enjoy whatever time he had with them. He knew that soon life would be busy once more, and he would have to stop being Jake Thayne, the son, and return to being Jake Thayne, the hunter and Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

“We will be sure to keep you in thought as we move forward,” Viridia spoke in a dignified voice as she said goodbye to her guest with a polite bow. The other party returned her bow before leaving, with Viridia simply unable to suppress a massive grin the moment they were gone.

A god had just sought her out and spoken to her not like an equal but someone of superior position. To make it better, this wasn’t even the first time it had happened. Over

a dozen gods had visited her over the last year or so, all of them on their best behavior in front of her, a mere mortal.

Viridia was fully aware they didn't respect her as a person, but what she represented. She was a Hall Master, the highest rank a mortal could get within the Order of the Malefic Viper – besides being the Chosen, of course. This title meant she didn't speak with her own authority but the authority of the Order.

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She had to admit she'd been nervous in the beginning. After the Malefic One's glorious victory over Yip of Yore, a lot had changed, with the biggest change being to their reputation. The Malefic Viper had shown everyone that he was still a true pinnacle being, capable of standing with the other Primordials. What's more, the gods of the multiverse weren't stupid.

In retrospect, they realized that many other pinnacle factions had helped the Malefic Viper kill Yip of Yore. Valhal had clearly assisted him, same with the Starseizing Titan who had more likely than not faked being injured by Yip. Eversmile had also helped, though many suspected he did so primarily for personal reasons, and even the Holy Church seemed to have provided some assistance behind the scenes.

Even if other Primordial factions hadn't helped, none of them had gotten in the way either. It was evident there was some unspoken belief that the Malefic One would win. At least none of them seemed to have made any plans whatsoever in the event of his death, and none of them showed any surprise either when Yip was slain.

That being the case, it was clear these factions had set themselves up to, at the very least, have a neutral relationship with the Order of the Malefic Viper. To truly hammer this home, the Academy of the Malefic Viper never had more outside recruits from pinnacle factions than in the last year. At least not since the Malefic One exiled himself to his Divine Realm all those eras ago.

All of this spoke to one thing: the other top multiversal factions recognized that the Order of the Malefic Viper was one of them. That being the case, what kind of status did someone like the Hall Master of this Order have compared to some minor pantheon with a couple of gods in it?

The answer was that they had to be very respectful. It wasn't as if Viridia could outright be disrespectful back, but no one would bat an eye if she treated them as equals, something Viridia could only have ever dreamed of.

All of these facts made her most recent task way more pleasant and less problematic than she had feared it would be. As the Order of the Malefic Viper regained its status, it also began rapidly expanding like never before. As the sole Hall Master, Viridia was

given the job of establishing a new Hall to serve as the headquarters within another universe.

She'd traveled to the 13th Universe with an entourage of primarily A- and S-grades, as well as five gods, only one of whom she'd met. They were there mainly to provide protection as the place her Patrons – the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon – had chosen to set up the Hall was a highly contested Great Planet.

The reason why it was so highly contested wasn't just because it was a Great Planet but because of what could be found nearby. Only a single long-range teleportation away, one could arrive at the sole World Wonder of this universe. A World Wonder that no faction had the ability to rule, simply due to how much value it held, making it too highly contested for anyone to allow it a single owner.

Now, the Order of the Malefic Viper would also begin to exploit the World Wonder for their own gain. With their rise in status, they had the ability to negotiate with the other factions who had a claim. It wouldn't come for free, and Viridia had to leverage their newfound momentum a lot, but so far, things had been going well. Viridia knew that things not going well wasn't an option, as out of all the World Wonders in the multiverse, this was likely the most important, as it would allow them to gain something even the Malefic One needed:

Alchemical ingredients that were suitable for gods.

This World Wonder was known as the Mycotic Depths and could be found within a vast asteroid field roughly the size of a galaxy, where each and every asteroid was held together by fungal growths, resulting in the environment changing on a regular basis. In the middle of this asteroid field, the main entrance to the Mycotic Abyss could be found by entering a cave in the largest of all the asteroids – and the source of all the fungal growth.

Upon entering, one would find oneself in an entirely new world filled with all forms of plants and fungi. It was a paradise for alchemists but also a hazardous location to explore. The environment was filled with toxic spores capable of killing even gods, along with verified reports of creatures with power far surpassing Godkings.

Despite the dangers, the treasures in there were simply too valuable, and needless to say, a World Wonder filled with poisonous mushrooms was invaluable to the Order of the Malefic Viper. And not just the top-level figures.

While the main entrance to the Mycotic Depths led to an area even gods had to be wary of, it was far from the only entrance. All throughout the asteroid field, more caves serving as portals to the Depths could be found, and based on their size, they would lead to different separate areas of the Mycotic Depths, with the lowest-level one safe even for relatively powerful C-grades.

Viridia had yet to enter this World Wonder herself, but a few of the A-grades with her had gone to explore together with members of the Altmar Empire, Risen, Holy Church, and even Automaton. Their exploration jobs were partly diplomatic in nature and partly to report back on how some of their unique skills and variants of Palate of the Malefic Viper reacted to the environment. From the latest reports, it was promising on both of those fronts.

She couldn't help but consider if she should perhaps visit herself, as even if she wasn't an alchemist, it would be good to have a better understanding of the World Wonder, but just then, she was interrupted.

"Excuse me, Hall Master?" one of Viridia's assistants spoke as he teleported into the room, shaking the Verdant Witch out of her thoughts.

"What is it?" Viridia asked, turning to the dragonkin as she wondered if more guests had arrived to try and form good relations with the Order of the Malefic Viper.

"I just received a message that the Order will be sending exploratory teams of C and B-grades to enter the Mycotic Depths, and you are to ensure they have spots available," the assistant spoke curtly.

"How many are we talking about?" she frowned.

"Initial estimates are around two thousand C-grades and a thousand B-grades to arrive within the week," the dragonkin answered.

"That should be easily manageable," Viridia nodded, happy to hear they weren't talking about that many people. It would have been rough if she had to try and pull some strings to make space for everyone, as securing these slots to enter the Mycotic Depths wasn't easy due to how much competition there was around entering.

To clarify, there was nothing system-enforced to limit the number of people who could enter the World Wonder. All restrictions were imposed by the factions who controlled the Mycotic Depths' entrances to prevent them from damaging or overrunning the World Wonder. It wasn't a dungeon, and what was harvested from there wouldn't simply pop back up whenever someone new entered. While the place was utterly massive, the fungi still needed time and space to grow.

"Also, If I may... I have been told that a number of promising prospects from the new universe will likely soon come to explore the World Wonder, with the Malefic Dragonkin, Draskil, already confirmed."

"Is the intent of the Chosen known?" Viridia asked, perking up a bit.

"Unknown as of now," the dragonkin said, much to Viridia's disappointment. Alas, better safe than sorry.

“In either case, bring me the head architect. I’ll need an update on the current construction progress. No matter what, inform them already now to push forward the resident spaces for C- and B-grades,” she made a quick decision.

If the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was coming, she had to ensure the place was at least presentable... because currently, she was standing in one of the few completed buildings.

“Oh, and ensure to keep enough land open to provide a space worthy of a Chosen,” Viridia said before finally dismissing the dragonkin.

With him gone, Viridia went over to a crystal tablet that helped record the number of slots the Order of the Malefic Viper currently possessed. While they had plenty for A-grades and below, they barely had any for S-grades.

As for gods... they didn’t use this slot system. Which did make her wonder out loud...

“How do the gods decide who can and cannot enter?”

She had spoken merely to herself... not expecting an answer to come from right behind her.

“They don’t, not outside certain periods with too much of a rush,” a voice she recognized entered her ears.

Without even a moment’s hesitation, she spun around and knelt down as she pressed her head against the floor. “I greet the Malefic One.”

The second she’d recognized who had appeared, she also felt the aura flood over her. It was even more awe-inspiring than all the other times she’d felt it, the Malefic Viper no longer bothering to hide his power as much as before.

“At ease,” he spoke, Viridia feeling her head forcefully raised from the floor to look up at the god. “You’ve made decent progress lately; the little trip to Nevermore is doing you good. Even so, I would warn you not to relax. The sisters are considering taking a Chosen of their own soon... and you’ve got pretty tough competition.”

Viridia’s eyes opened wide as she momentarily made eye contact with the Malefic Viper, sending a shiver down her spine. Nevertheless, she focused and answered. “I will heed your words, Malefic One.”

“Up to you,” he smiled, Viridia noticing only now how she’d tensed up her own body. “Oh, and don’t worry about the lack of a proper welcome. I don’t plan on staying for long.”

The Malefic Viper turned to look in the direction of the Mycotic Depths as he smiled. “A World Wonder that’s essentially a cave full of mushrooms. How could I resist paying such a wonderful place a visit? Almost makes me nostalgic thinking about it.”

“May the Malefic One have a successful expedition,” Viridia managed to say despite how nervous she was.

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be quite... let’s go with scrumptious.”

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Chapter 1078: Time To Open Up

All good things must come to an end.

Jake had enjoyed the time he’d spent with his family. While it hadn’t led to much progress, he had managed to get some work done here and there, primarily by playing with his Puzzle Box of the Seeker or meditating and studying the Record Fragment left by the First Sage.

Besides that, Caleb had convinced Jake to help train a few assassins, but that was about it. Jake’s visit ended up taking longer than he’d initially expected. He also had to meet with Miranda a few times to discuss the future, but other than that, things had been super chill.

He felt refreshed and ready to face what came next... and it happened on just another regular evening as Jake was eating with his parents. Suddenly, they all stopped, even Adam, as each and every one of them received a system message. They all knew what it was.

Most people in the galaxy, if not the entire universe, had been waiting for it... for them to finally know what would come next. Jake didn’t wait as he checked it out.

As the final Prima Guardian has met its end or accomplished its goal, the 93rd Universe weathered the test to see which planets are capable of survival while deciding who is qualified to lay claim to the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

World Leaders of each galaxy have been promoted to Seat of the Exalted Prima Administrators, allowing them to vie for control over their galaxy’s Seat. Planets have been claimed or lost, and relations have been formed within each galaxy.

The Exalted Prima watches on with interest to see who shall one day arrive with a rightful claim.

Based on the performance of each galaxy, different rewards have been distributed dependent on contributions during the event. All natives of every galaxy have received additional bonuses dependent on the final ranking of the galaxy during this event.

With the event concluded, restrictions upon the 93rd Universe have been lifted. All limits on outside communication and transportation outside of each galaxy are now fully removed.

In addition, all Prima Vessels have lost most functionality, and all intergalactic teleportation must happen under regular circumstances without assistance from the Prima Vessel. Despite being inert, these Prima Vessels can still be transported by World Leaders and, upon reaching the minimum requirements, used by Administrators to travel directly to the Seat of the Exalted Prima within each galaxy.

Finally, with the 93rd Universe having found its footing, it shall soon begin to welcome those from the outside. Restrictions on multiversal travel have been lessened, allowing anyone below high-tier C-grade (level 300 and below) to travel to the 93rd Universe, starting 100 days from now. This level restriction will rise by 1 level every 100 days until reaching peak C-grade (level 349). Be aware that has any being traveled to the 93rd Universe once, they can always return, despite the level restriction.

Good luck, natives of the 93rd Universe.

It was a long system message with a lot to unpack. Starting from the top, it was just repeating a lot of what the system message they got upon finishing the event for the Milky Way Galaxy had said. The only new tidbit was about the Exalted Prima watching on, which Jake wasn't sure how to interpret. What it did make clear, though, was that they were indeed competing to lay rightful claim to a World Wonder, meaning the system wasn't done spurring on conflict.

After that was just the talk about rewards. Compared to prior system events, this one didn't have any fancy titles or anything like that. Jake and everyone else had also already gotten their rewards in the form of loot from the Prima Guardian, with Jake reaping the best of it with his mythical Administrator's Seal of the Exalted Prima. As well as the fact he was now an Administrator of the Seat, of course, with him even being the top-ranked one following the death of Ell'Hakan.

There was also the boost to Records for the entire galaxy, but that one was a lot harder to quantify. All Jake knew was that Miranda and many others who tracked that kind of thing had statistics showing that the average leveling speed had risen following the

event's end, with many who'd previously experienced a wall also suddenly able to overcome it.

He didn't really have many thoughts about the Prima Vessels. Only that he should probably go and relocate the Prima Vessel somewhere safer than in the middle of a desert, as he would need it to teleport to the Seat of the Exalted Prima once he became B-grade.

Finally, perhaps the biggest one, and also something Jake had expected to see, was the opening up of the 93rd Universe. Being able to freely communicate and travel back to other universes was great, but the biggest part was that now others could also come to their universe.

This was definitely one of the hottest topics of speculation in political circles recently, and one of Miranda's most prominent points of worry. Based on historical data, they knew that the universe wouldn't just fully open up from one day to the other, but many had suspected that at least anyone below B-grade would now be allowed to freely travel back and forth.

That in itself was a massive pain to deal with. Sure, Jake and everyone else he hung out with were powerful, but what would they do if someone like the Holy Church sent a billion peak C-grades? Well, their only response would be to have the Order of the Malefic Viper also send a whole bunch of peak C-grades, which would make Valhal, the Court of Shadows, Risen, Endless Empire, and who knows else also send in entire armies, instantly flooding the galaxy.

However, Jake was relieved to see that there was still a level restriction and a decently low one, too. To be clear, level 300 was still pretty damn strong, but it at least allowed them to avoid those at the peak of C-grade... for a while anyway. Every one hundred days, it would increase by one level, which meant that with rough math, it would take around thirteen and a half years till peak C-grades could enter their universe. At that point, things would definitely be a lot more stable than now.

Having a hundred days of leeway till people could travel to their universe was also great, as it allowed them to ensure the Holy Church was gone for good by that time. Jake also didn't doubt Miranda had a lot of plans for how to ensure they weren't overrun. He knew she had already worked on deals with several factions, but she was far from done.

As a final note on that topic – and the main reason Miranda hadn't quite panicked at the prospect of the universe opening up - it wasn't as if teleporting to their universe was easy in any way currently. Jake just made it look easy as a Chosen, and while most factions had methods to bring people back and forth, it wasn't cheap and only worth doing for actual elites. With time and higher-level experts on both sides of the teleportation circle, things would get easier, but for now, the ones outside of the 93rd

Universe had to facilitate ninety-nine percent of it. Breaching the void wasn't easy, after all.

Having gone through the message properly, it appeared the others had done the same.

"I guess we all know what this means," Jake's dad said after a little while.

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"Yeah... I'll have to head off now," Caleb answered with a nod as he quickly stood up, gave Maja a kiss, Adam a quick hug, and teleported away with a wave goodbye to the rest of them.

Jake probably also had to get going, but he was temporarily delayed as he felt something else. For the last few years, Jake had been free, but now, his stalker was back in full force as Jake felt himself being observed.

"How about you, Jake?" his mom asked, looking surprised that he hadn't left yet. "Aren't you needed elsewhere?"

"I'm leaving in a second," Jake said with a sigh. "I was just momentarily distracted by someone."

"Well, I apologize, I didn't mean to disturb your family dinner. In fact, I'm also eating right now, having quite a nurturing meal," the Malefic Viper answered.

"Up for talking a bit later, alright?" Jake quickly answered.

"Fair enough. But just so you know, I don't need an update about what the system notification said; I already heard it," the Viper quickly clarified, getting a mental confirmation from Jake.

"Who distracted you?" Maja asked, confused.

"Just a needy god," Jake shrugged, getting a few weird stares. "But I do have to leave now. You already have my number if I'm on the planet, but if I'm in another universe, just contact Miranda or Caleb."

"Just take care of yourself," his dad said with a nod.

"I will," Jake said as he turned to Adam. "You also be good, right?"

Adam nodded before asking a question no one else would. "When are you coming to visit again?"

Jake just gave the kid a small smile. "Who knows? Just know that when I'm not here, it's because I'm fighting dragons or evil mushroom people."

"Are there good mushroom people?" Adam asked, confused.

"You have a bright future ahead of you," Jake said, giving the kid a wide smile as he ruffled his hair. With a final goodbye to the others, Jake left the house through the front door, briefly stopped by his own little residence to pick up a few things he'd left there before promptly shooting off to the teleportation center to quickly return to Haven.

On the way, he reached out to Villy once more. *"Thoughts on the universe opening up soon?"*

"We all knew it would happen, didn't we?" the snake god answered promptly. *"One can only hope that the foundation you've established is powerful enough to survive what's to come. And I'm not talking about a foundation purely based on power, but one of stability. Your little budding empire won't rise or fall due to a lack of soldiers but inadequate administration. The only way I could see your rule fall apart due to a lack of power was if you died, but telling you not to die really isn't advice I hope I'd need to give."*

"So what you're saying is I need to actually engage with ruling the galaxy?" Jake asked, a sense of dread washing over him.

"What? No, I never said that. I just said that you need to ensure the people you delegated the job to do a good job, and from what I've gathered, that witch of yours is doing fine so far. Unsurprisingly, I might add, as she is under the tutelage of people I also trust to handle administrative tasks within my Order. It wasn't a coincidence I approached the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon as one of the first things after I left my realm," Villy explained, continuing:

"However, I will say that at least knowing about what's going on is a good idea. You also need to set a direction, both for her sake and your own. For you, because if you can't even tell your faction what to do, what the hell's the point of it? And for her sake, so she can use you as a shield. As the one enacting policies, she will get a lot of flack if she also made them, but if all she's doing is carrying out your will, she can use that as a defense whenever she does anything unpopular. People are way less likely to dare bring up complaints to you."

Jake listened but wasn't quite sure if the Viper's advice was even applicable. *"Earth is ruled by a council, though. The plan is to do the same with the entire galaxy. They are the ones who decide stuff, not me."*

"They decide the small stuff. You're still the one who sets the direction. Why do you think slavery has been outlawed in the entire galaxy? That the laws governing every civilization are slowly morphing to become more similar to Earth's before the

integration? Even if you don't tell those beneath you what direction to move in, they'll still try to do things they believe you'd want them to," the Viper continued explaining.

"I can't really argue against that... but the entire point of this council is that I'm not some dictator telling everyone what to do," Jake sighed mentally.

"And yet you shall dictate the direction of your galaxy," Villy said in a matter-of-fact voice. "But, hey, your mere desire to not be a dictator will bleed through and more likely than not make your rule far less authoritarian than others. Just remember to keep the people important to your little faction loyal; that's the most important part. You aren't living in a democracy, and while having the support of the general populace is all well and good, it's just a tiny bonus at most."

"I'm beginning to reconsider if taking advice for running a functional society from an evil snake god with an Order that isn't exactly known for being a nice place is wise," Jake said after a moment.

"Hey! People love the Order! If they're worth anything, that is," Villy said, making Jake even more sure he should stop listening, even if some of the things the god said made sense.

"Anyhow, what have you been up to recently?" Jake chose to change the subject.

"Until very recently, I was busy digesting a certain someone. Still not entirely done, and I won't be for a while, but it's getting there. With my proper return to the multiverse, I also decided to finally explore some of the places I hadn't had a chance to visit during my isolation. Not that long ago, I entered a World Wonder called the Mycotic Depths, and from the name alone, I'm sure you would love the place," the snake god answered.

"A World Wonder?" Jake asked, trying to ignore the name. "How does that one work? And are you talking to me from inside of it right now?"

"The Mycotic Depths is a lot like Yalsten, where the Treasure Hunt event took place. It's a separate world from the regular universes, and it wasn't even known it was a World Wonder before well into the 13th era. However, once people began to explore its insides, its status as a World Wonder became clear," Villy explained.

"Wait, I'm a bit confused... Yalsten wasn't at all considered a World Wonder, right? If so, why does this mushroom cave get called one while Yalsten didn't if they're both just separate spaces?" Jake wondered.

"In many ways, World Wonders are just extremely useful objects or locations found within the different universes, but what truly makes them World Wonders is the system's direct involvement. The Mycotic Depths has different caves one can use to enter, bringing you to different areas within, and while it's all one space inside, they're still separated. Do you remember that barrier in your Tutorial that cut off the inner section

with more powerful monsters? This is a bit like that. Natural barriers result in certain sections being restricted to those below certain power levels. No matter how much I wanted to, I would never be able to enter the section for S-grades, much less C-grades like you. All regulated by the system."

"I see... but it seems like the world isn't entirely cut off, seeing as you can talk to me," Jake said.

"Communication to the outside world is somewhat restricted inside, but the version of me you're talking to isn't one inside right now. You're talking to my real body that's in my realm, busy digesting Yip of Yore. The one in the World Wonder is one of my special avatars," Villy shared. *"If that avatar does find something in there it's too weak to handle, I may go with my true body, but otherwise, it would just be a waste and a needless risk."*

"Do you never go anywhere with your true body?" Jake wondered. Newest update provided by **novel**·fire·net

"Few gods do, especially not those at my level. It isn't due to cowardice, though. I'm working on things I need the power of my true body to handle. Meanwhile, exploring a World Wonder with an avatar is as efficient as if I'd gone with my real body, as it's more than powerful enough," the Viper said in a casual tone.

"I see," Jake just answered. By now, he'd already gone through the teleportation circle and was back in Haven.

"You interested in also paying a visit to the wonderful Mycotic Depths? Mushrooms as far as the eye can see, and there's even an entire civilization of Deepdwellers there! Remember those from that little dungeon under your house?" the snake god attempted to whisper poison into his ear.

"Man, I would love to, but I'm just heading into a very important meeting. You know, to stay on top of political stuff, something you said is a good idea," Jake quickly excused himself.

"Fine, fine, I guess you wouldn't have the time to afterward either. Not with your other upcoming trip and all," Villy said, definitely baiting Jake to ask him to elaborate.

"What upcoming trip?" Jake just had to ask despite knowing it was bait.

"Oh? I'm pretty sure I heard you planned on going on a trip in an attempt to connect with your inner dendrophile."

... yeah, Jake didn't even know what that word meant.

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Chapter 1079: One Last Meeting

"I'm not even sure if that was an insult or not..." Jake answered after a bit, still not certain what the hell a dendrophile was. It was times like this he really missed having the internet, as usually he would just search up stuff like that. Hopefully he could get his own Partial Omniscience or something similar in the future...

"It was merely an observation. If I wanted to insult you, I would have insinuated you were a paraphiliac instead," Villy answered, throwing out more words Jake didn't know the definition of.

"I know this is probably really funny for you, but I'm just getting confused," Jake shot back, not at all ashamed of his ignorance.

"Eh, fine. I was just hinting at it being a good idea for you to pay the Pantheon of Life a little visit," the Viper finally stopped beating around the bush. *"If I recall correctly, you have a standing invitation and a little gift waiting from Nature's Attendant, and I'm sure Dina would also welcome you. Oh, and there was one more person there, right? Who was it again..."*

Jake refused to answer on principle, as he knew the Viper was just playing with him.

"Ah, yes! Yggdrasil would probably also like to see you. I've heard through the grapevine that she's taken an interest in your abilities, and seeing as Yggdrasil is a very good friend to have, I would heavily implore you to go," Villy continued, at least turning a bit more serious.

"I already planned on paying them a visit," Jake answered, fine with being blunt. *"Also, it's about time I clear up the situation with Artemis."*

"Oh yeah, there was that, too!" the Malefic Viper said, sounding incredibly amused. *"Looking forward to seeing how that one turns out for sure. It must be super awkward for you both, seeing as you two have never really met and yet been so... close. Definitely a lot to unpack there and deal with; just make sure she doesn't end up killing you to avoid any bad rumors from spreading."*

"You're enjoying this way too much," Jake sighed. *"It'll be fine. She at least invited me to visit, so we will see what happens when the time comes. Hopefully, even if things go south, it won't end up with me getting permanently deleted."*

“Think positively. If she does kill you, it’ll likely be within the territory of Yggdrasil, at which point she’d probably just bring you right back to life without even thinking about it first,” the Viper said, continuing to be amused.

“I’m just going to assume it won’t come to that,” Jake sighed, wanting to move on from the topic. *“As I said, I already planned on paying a visit. I had considered waiting for B-grade, but there probably isn’t a need for that.”*

“There isn’t,” the Viper agreed, obliging with Jake’s intent to move the conversation forward. *“They have some great hunting grounds for you to explore, and I’m sure you can get plenty of levels there if you so desire. Personally, I would also like to see you go sooner rather than later. Not as Jake, muse of Artemis, but as my Chosen and a representative of the Order. Your visit will no doubt be public, and the fact you get a nice welcome will communicate to the rest of the multiverse that the Order and Pantheon of Life are still on good terms, no matter how opposite our factions might be in many areas.”*

“So now it’s suddenly a work trip, huh,” Jake muttered.

“Two mushrooms with one bite!”

“Never, ever, use that saying again,” Jake said in his most serious tone since their conversation began.

“Well, excuse me for finding throwing stones at birds a silly thing when you can instead devour some savory snacks,” the Viper continued to tease Jake. *“Anyway, we’ll talk more when you’re done on Earth and stop by the Order. How long do you reckon it’ll take?”*

“You need me back as soon as possible, right?”

“Eh, no rush,” the Viper said flippantly.

“Please say you need me back as soon as possible,” Jake tried again.

“I’m not gonna let you use me as an excuse to get out of a meeting. In fact, as your Patron, I would recommend that you really get engaged with it. That you go in there with full passion and are an active participant from beginning to end, truly-“

“Oops, you’re cutting out, bye!” Jake said as he severed the telepathic connection before he could hear any more of such drivel.

Besides, he had already arrived at the meeting hall in Haven, and as expected, he was the last person there. Partly because he really hadn’t hurried coming over. Also, everyone knew the system event would end soon, so the World Leaders had all returned to their own planets, only leaving behind a few dedicated diplomats – most of

which had skills to contact the World Leader directly in case other means of communication didn't work.

Many of the people who were supposed to be in this meeting had stayed in Haven for the last few weeks, with only a couple of exceptions. Those exceptions had also arrived before Jake.

Miranda, Lillian, Arthur, the Sky Whale, Sword Saint, and a whole slew of diplomats and officials Jake didn't know by name were already present in the meeting room, and Jake found it notable that none of the faction leaders were present. Jake had kind of expected to see people like Casper, and maybe Carmen participate. Then again, Caleb hadn't talked about taking part in any meeting in Haven and thinking about it just a little more, everyone was bound to be busy dealing with their own stuff within each faction.

Steeling himself, Jake opened the door to the meeting room and entered as he also dispelled his stealth skill – because, yes, of course Jake had used his stealth skill to go back to Haven. If he hadn't, he would have been stuck in a queue at the teleportation center or been caught in the rush of people who were also busy due to the system notification.

This meeting room had been constructed within the last year, as the number of people Haven had to welcome for political discussions like this was seemingly only growing. The new room was far larger than any of the others and had a stupidly large table in the middle, along with several other desks out to the side.

All the important people were seated at the table in the middle, while far more could sit at the other desks. The design alone made it apparant that the people out to the sides weren't really there to speak but merely observe and take notes. This content belongs to novel•

Jake wasn't keen on these meetings growing larger, but with a mask on his face, he could manage all the people who were bound to be staring at him for the next who-knows-how-long. It was almost as if they didn't know Jake could feel how many people were watching him at all times and that it made him hyper-councious about himself.

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Anyhow, after entering, the Sword Saint was the first to notice him. He was also the first to speak to him. "There he is. It's been a while."

"Yeah, it sure has," Jake nodded politely in greeting.

"I heard you took a holiday to visit the family? Good choice. I also set some time aside to spend with Reika and some of my other less disappointing descendants," the Sword Saint said with a smile that didn't match his pretty crude words.

Jake also knew enough about political bullshit by now to realize that the reason the Sword Saint even asked him that was because of all the other diplomats and whatnot present. It was all done to humanize Jake a bit, something he had nothing against as he did look a little inhuman walking around with his mask on and everything.

Oh yeah, and they also knew he'd blown up a planet to kill his "rival," which probably made a few of them a bit frightful.

"It was a good time," Jake answered the old man with a smile before he turned to Miranda. "Anything surprising happened since last? Besides the system message, of course."

"No, things are going relatively swimmingly," Miranda said as she regarded the other people in the room. "With everyone gathered, let's get started. The first topic to touch on is the Holy Church and its promised retreat from the Milky Way Galaxy. I am happy to report that we have recorded a mass exodus already within minutes of the galaxy opening up. By our estimates, they will be gone within the week."

Jake had taken a seat by now and nodded along as Miranda continued.

"Regarding the compensation offered for their betrayal of the Milky Way Galaxy, we have chosen to put the vast majority of resources toward rebuilding what was lost during the war. Our people on the planets the Holy Church are leaving behind are also working to hopefully establish a connection with the in-progress galactic teleportation network within the next decade. To clarify, as I received some questions regarding this, the planets shall be under the control and ownership of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. What happens to them is up to his sole discretion."

Taking part in a meeting like this with Miranda was always fun because Jake ended up learning a lot of new things, including the fact that he apparently owned a lot of other planets besides Earth. At least this was his first time hearing about it, and while a few in the large room did look disappointed, the big players had either known or expected this.

Jake had no idea what Miranda was planning, something he was entirely okay with. He had no reason to mistrust her, and he believed they shared the same goals, so he just went along with whatever she said by nodding stoically.

In fact, that turned out to be his only real job during this entire meeting. There really wasn't much new information to discuss outside of the galaxy's approach to new people from other universes traveling there. Some of those present proposed that they should totally ban all multiversal travel to the galaxy, but it was very quickly made clear that wasn't going to happen.

What was also clear was the need for a unified framework for how many could migrate or just come for a visit. Having just emerged from one war between large multiversal factions, there was a lot of fear that it could start again now that large factions could get

reinforcements from the entire multiverse. Some even raised concerns that the Milky Way Galaxy could become some sort of proxy battlefield for several major factions.

Jake could understand them somewhat, even the ones with solid knowledge of how the multiverse worked. It was exceedingly rare to have galaxies with a lot of factions co-existing like this. While it was pretty normal for the Court of Shadows and even Valhal to hang around in galaxies owned by other factions, the same certainly couldn't be said about the Endless Empire, Risen, or United Tribes. Heck, Jake was also reminded that the Dao Sect had that planet Eron went to.

What's more, nearly all these factions also had a massive presence on a singular planet in the galaxy: Earth. In the eyes of many, this was a disaster just waiting to happen, as they were bound to clash and come into conflict at one point or another. While things were okay for now, who was to say how things would look in a hundred years? A thousand? Who could promise that the next generation or the one after that wouldn't renege on promises made and attempt to take over the galaxy if they saw a good opportunity?

Again, all valid concerns. Miranda wasn't fazed, though, as she merely took a deep breath and spoke:

"I'm not going to be able to entirely dispel your apprehension and fear today, but do allow me to offer a counterpoint. Why are all these factions present in this galaxy, to begin with? Why are they so keen to have a presence, even if it means living under the Order of the Malefic Viper's rule? The answer lies in the reason why the Order rules in the first place. What do all of these factions present have in common?" Miranda spoke, a beastkin Jake guessed was from the United Tribes promptly answering her:

"A relation to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper," he said while looking at Jake.

"Correct... for the most part," Miranda continued. "All of these factions also have in common that they are on friendly terms with the Order of the Malefic Viper. Something they want to continue being the case. While you may fear what the next few generations might plan, do remember that without the backing of their factions, they will be unable to be any threat whatsoever. Does anyone genuinely believe that any one faction dares to make an enemy out of a Primordial just for one small galaxy? Now or in a thousand years?"

Although her point was obvious to someone like Jake, it seemed to have an impact based on how many people in the room reacted. Riding the momentum, Miranda quickly continued.

"Also, do allow me to remind everyone that while the Chosen of the Malefic Viper is the person in charge of Earth, he is not the only individual with the power to suppress entire factions from our small little planet."

Taking his cue, the Sword Saint, who'd otherwise been sitting there calmly, flared his aura as he spoke. "I do find it a bit offensive that Jake gets all the attention. I even began to believe it was because I had fallen behind and had so many worthy opponents to fight in the galaxy... yet after wiping out the resistance on dozens of planets, I didn't meet a single person who could handle more than three sword strokes."

It was a bit on the nose, but again, it seemed to work. The Sword Saint also used Jake's actual name and not a title, indicating they were on roughly equal levels... something Jake wouldn't even contest. While he believed he was more powerful than the Sword Saint by a fair margin, that didn't include if the old man went all-out with his Transcendence. If he did use it, well, Jake didn't think he was the only person in the galaxy who had a chance to slay Ell'Hakan, though the Sword Saint would have suffered far worse consequences even if he succeeded.

"Adding on to that, we also have the ones personally allied with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and not the Order itself. This includes the Sylphian Hawk, who carries a Divine Blessing from Stormild, as well as Vesperia, True Royal of the Endless Empire. Besides that, he is personally close to high-level figures among the Risen, Court of Shadows, Valhal, and even the Dao Sect."

Okay, Jake wouldn't really say he was close to Eron in the slightest, but sure, Miranda could use him as an example. Also, he noticed how she didn't mention Arnold or even Maria, but he didn't say anything as he assumed she had a reason. Also... the absence of the Fallen King in that list of names was jarring.

Something he hoped to remedy sooner rather than later.

The rest of the meeting was primarily Miranda trying to keep everyone calm and on the same page while giving them pointers on how to communicate with their populace to promote stability.

Jake didn't have to say a single thing throughout, except at the very end, where he stood up and looked at Miranda and everyone else present. "Continue your good work. Let's hope I won't need to personally get involved in any of it."

His words had two meanings. First, everyone knew that Jake's involvement usually meant killing a lot of people, so what he said served as a warning. Second, Jake was just being honest with them. The second meaning was that he really hoped he wouldn't have to get involved in any of their work, as that would be super annoying.

Based on Miranda's approving look as he left, Jake hadn't done badly during this meeting. Also, while there were many more meetings to go over the next few days, including conferences with other major factions of the galaxy, Jake wouldn't attend any of them. He'd only been at this one to show himself and back up Miranda, and he was confident she could handle the rest.

With this one last meeting done, it was time to finally return to the first universe and the Order of the Malefic Viper. He also knew he wouldn't go alone, as he'd already seen a few people waiting at his lodge, likely wanting to ride along on his way back. In fact, he even saw a certain old man get there just before he arrived himself, having slipped out of the building faster than Jake.

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Chapter 1080: Out Of This Universe

It was evident a lot of people had looked forward to getting out of the universe as fast as possible once it opened up. Jake had rightfully expected a few people to tag along with him, but he had severely underestimated just how many it would be... because he wasn't sure when his poor little lodge had last been this busy.

The Sword Saint, along with Reika and some of the alchemists from the Noboru clan who'd joined the Order, were naturally there. Then there was Vesperia, Sylphie, Maria, and Carmen, but he also saw a bunch of people he expected to be members of other major factions. All were people Jake didn't know.

Jake felt mixed emotions seeing all these people in his private space, but at least the ones he didn't know were waiting outside. He also felt *very* mixed emotions upon seeing Carmen trying to convince Sword Saint to take a banana. Sure, Rick had said harvesting bananas was good for *musa*, but there was such a thing as asking permission first.

Deciding not to even bother confronting him, Jake flew over, and once he got close enough, used One Step to teleport down and appear on the porch, right beside Carmen, who was holding two bananas, looking to hand out one of them.

"Oh, you're finally here," Carmen said with a smile once she saw him, not a hint of shame in her voice. "I reckoned that you could hear the sound of me munching bananas from across the planet, and here you are."

"There is no correlation between those two things," Jake said in a deadpan tone, not even bothering as he turned to all the people there. "Quite an entourage... am I right to assume you all want to travel to the Order of Malefic Viper with me?"

He got a few nods of confirmation as Carmen spoke again. "Traveling with you is the easiest way of getting out of the universe. Once we're in the first universe, getting to anywhere else will be a lot simpler."

"I should be charging for this," Jake muttered.

"If Chosen wishes for us to—" one of beastkin with a pretty respectable level began to speak as Sword Saint cut him off.

"He's joking. For a Chosen to charge paltry amounts to assist his fellow natives of universe would be unsightly," he said, Jake not sure if old man was trying to save Jake's dignity or just really wanted to move things along.

"I gotta ask... aren't you needed to do stuff here on Earth? With World Council and all that?" Jake asked as he looked at old man.

"No, and if I am, this is a good opportunity for those who rely on me to figure out solutions on ir own," Sword Saint answered bluntly. Jake had noticed old man seemed a bit on edge both now and during meeting earlier, and he had a ory as to why.

"I guess it has gotten difficult finding anything worth fighting on Earth at this point, huh," Jake said with a sigh.

"An unused blade will turn dull," old man merely answered, confirming what Jake thought.

Jake also got feeling many of ors felt same. re simply weren't many things worth fighting left on ir planets. If y wanted to find worthy opponents, y would have to eir leave ir current planets to explore ir local star systems or go to anor universe.

Exploring something like solar system would take a long time, and it wasn't even certain one would find things to fight. Jake guessed that one could find B-grades and stuff on or planets that were less hospitable to life, but problem was that one couldn't know for sure.

Meanwhile, if he went to Order, he would have a massive list of potential hunting grounds with well-defined level ranges of monsters found re. Even if he went to someplace riskier, he would at least know re were opponents to fight. On or hand, if he stayed, he could be flying within a space worm for several weeks – or some or vehicle for months - just to discover that Pluto not only wasn't a planet but didn't even have anything to kill on it.

Speaking of finding a place with things to potentially kill... seeing as Sylphie and Sword Saint were both re, he wondered where y were planning to go once at Order. Well, Sylphie probably didn't have a plan but was just bored on Earth and wanted to tag along with him, but re was a good chance Sword Saint didn't have a set plan eir.

"Hey, Sylphie, did you have any plans on where to go once we reach first universe?" he asked hawk.

“Ree,” she answered, surprising Jake a bit.

“Really? You need to go right away?” he asked.

“Ree.”

“It’s because I plan on going to Panon of Life not that long after arriving at Order, and I believe you and Sword Saint have a standing invitation from Dina to visit, so I wondered if you wanted to come along?” Jake asked both hawk and old man.

Regarding Sylphie, Jake had entirely misjudged her. She did have a plan once she arrived in first universe, though she luckily wasn’t in a rush. Stormild had actually contacted Sylphie and told her to go visit some “bird friends” and get to know m. Sylphie wasn’t clear on details, but he was pretty sure Stormild was talking about Sylphie visiting incredibly powerful divine beasts.

Also, he didn’t really care that he asked this question in front of a lot of or people. Villy had said it was good to make his visit public, so having se people spread word about what happened shouldn’t be a problem—quite opposite.

“I would assume Panon of Life also has hunting grounds available?” old man asked after a bit of thinking.

“Duh,” Jake said, shaking his head at dumb question.

“Visiting Panon of Life does seem like it could be an idea n,” Sword Saint answered, pretty much confirming he was going.

“Ree,” Sylphie also confirmed her intent to go, meaning that ir Nevermore Party would have a little reunion soon... what was left of it anyway.

“Excuse me, Sire, would it be possible to expedite our return?” Vesperia spoke up, spotting an opportunity to jump into conversation.

Her tone instantly made Jake feel bad about not having waited to have this conversation with Sylphie and Sword Saint, as he failed to consider that he was making everyone else wait for him to talk. He also recalled how Vesperia had gone through quite an ordeal to return to Endless Empire first time she returned, making him feel even worse as she probably wanted to rush back as quickly as possible for safety.

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“Oh, of course, let’s get going,” Jake said apologetically before he motioned for everyone to follow him as y headed down to this lab. Once re, y went to room with teleportation circle already prepared, and using his connection with Malefic Viper as his Chosen, Jake began minor ritual to initiate teleportation.

“Do hang on, everyone. process is still a bit crude, and getting pulled through void doesn’t tend to be most pleasant of experiences. Especially for any first-timers,” Jake warned m all as he felt bridge between universes form.

Jake was ready as he braced himself for journey through void. He half-expected something to happen, but seconds passed as he felt completely and utterly disorientated. n, without furr warning, he felt solid ground beneath his feet as his vision returned.

A few of people around him fell to ir knees and started dry-heaving, while Jake and his friends were mostly fine as this wasn’t ir first time. Not to say both Sword Saint and Maria didn’t look a lot more pale now than y had when y left Earth, but neir showed ir discomfort outwardly.

Checking out his surroundings, Jake noticed y had teleported elsewhere than usual. Probably for best, as Jake usually went straight to his own residence, something he wouldn’t have been a fan of with this many tagging along.

destination this time was instead a large circular chamber with teleporter in middle and only one entrance, outside of which Jake saw ir welcome party already waiting.

After having given everyone time to get ir bearings, a recognizable voice echoed throughout chamber as door opened.

“I humbly welcome you all to Order of Malefic Viper, especially you, Lord Thayne, and I congratulate you on your victory over Usurper of Yip of Yore,” familiar demon spoke as Jake looked over and saw Irin walk in.

succubus looked much same as usual, with only difference being her more conservative outfit. She usually wore quite revealing clothing, while now she looked more like a professional office clerk. He also gave her a quick Identify for good measure and saw she had made great progress.

[Demon – lvl 302]

She hadn’t come alone, eir. With her were quite a few or succubi and incubi, and through a quick headcount on both sides of chamber, Jake quickly realized re was one demon for everyone who had teleported re, minus a couple.

“Thank you,” Jake answered succubus. “I assume everything’s been taken care of here while I was gone?”

“Naturally, but if you find anything wanting, promptly let me know,” she said with a smile as she walked closer. Jake also couldn’t help but notice how several of demons around her were higher level, yet it was evident who was in charge of this welcoming party. And damn, did she look like she enjoyed that.

As Jake and Irin briefly spoke, or demons also approached their respective targets. Jake was a bit confused at first about why they were there, but Irin luckily quickly explained telepathically.

"All of these people are individuals representing different factions, most of them small ones. While you naturally cannot compare to you or those you normally associate with, each of them is considered a genius in their respective fields of alchemy. Of course, their primary reason for being here is to form a stronger connection with Order of Malefic Viper while also being natives of not just your universe but your galaxy," she let him know after instantly recognizing Jake had no idea who they were.

"See, this is why I made you my official liaison," Jake answered in a thankful tone before speaking out loud to the alchemists. "Let us split up from here. I'm certain you all have a lot to process and go through, but just listen to the people from Humanoid Resources, and it should be fine. Happy onboarding."

Turning back to Irin, he addressed her once more: "Take me to the gateway. For now, I plan on returning to my residence."

"Please follow me once you're ready to go," Irin said with her usual professionalism before motioning for him to follow.

Jake nodded as he looked at Sword Saint. "Will you come along, or...?"

"No, I'm sure there are people waiting for you at your residence, and I have no desire to barge in on your reunion. Just contact me once you plan on heading to Panon of Life. In the meantime, I plan on doing some shopping. I've run out of high-quality painting supplies," the old man answered, subtly complaining once more about the lack of proper opponents on Earth as he'd evidently had time to do so much painting he'd run out of materials.

"Alright," Jake nodded as he turned to Maria and Vesperia, but before he could say anything, True Royal spoke up.

"I shall leave immediately; I have an escort waiting for me," Vesperia said in a hurried voice. "I would have loved to spend some more time, but it's best I return to Heartlands as soon as possible. Know that you are free to visit anytime, but even if you don't, I am not planning to stay cooped up there forever.."

"I understand," Jake nodded before throwing Maria a look.

"I just needed a ride to the universe, and I'll find my way from here," the fire archer answered. "See you around, and remember that favor you owe me."

Jake nodded as two got a few stares at mention of an owed favor, as a lot of people present understood importance of something like that. Especially demons part of Humanoid Resources knew just how important contracts and promises were.

“Same. Except for promise part, but I damn well expect you to come or at least have a really good excuse not to if I ask for a favor,” Carmen said. “And in case you care, I plan on doing some hardcore training back at Valhal’s headquarters, but I may stop by now and n.”

“Alright,” Jake said with a smile. “See you around, and you’re always welcome, but do note that I may be at Panon of Life for a while.”

“Eh, we’re gonna live for who knows how fucking long. I’m sure our schedules will match up eventually,” Carmen shrugged. “Anyhow, see ya.”

With those words, she left along with Sword Saint and Maria, escorted by a bunch of demons, including an incubus that trailed a good five steps behind Carmen with a nervous look on his face.

Jake didn’t even have to ask Reika and or alchemists from Noboru clan as y had already spoken with ir respective demons, and all Jake and Reika did was exchange a look as she moud thank you before y walked out of chamber.

That left just Sylphie, who he didn’t even ask if she wanted to go to residence with him. It was kind of a given as y’d already agreed to go to Panon of Life later, and contrary to Sword Saint, hawks didn’t need to go shopping for profession supplies.

Following Irin, y soon made it to a gate, and with Jake’s token, he walked through. His vision shifted for only a moment before he appeared in large mansion alongside Sylphie and Irin who naturally also came along.

However, right as y entered his residence, Jake noticed something was off. Frowning, he released a Pulse of Perception, and outside of mansion building, things certainly didn’t look same as usual.

“What hell happened here?” Jake asked with confusion, Irin quickly picking up on what he was asking.

“Lady Dawnleaf, along with Grand Elder, have made some minor modifications to give her a personal space to conduct her alchemy without disturbing you or being disturbed herself,” succubus answered.

“You call this minor?” Jake asked as he quickly went out front door, making what Meira and Duskleaf had done come into full view.

Jake's residence was its own separate space, and usually, it was just a decently sized compound with a few buildings and a pretty large lawn he normally used for rituals and stuff. Now, space had been expanded significantly, lawn extending many kilometers into distance.

What's more, a few kilometers away, a massive, mostly white tower had appeared, standing at least a kilometer tall. At its top, a glowing white orb sat, and from it, a barrier fell to form a massive transparent bubble all around tower with a radius of a kilometer or so. design of building gave clear mage tower vibes, and Jake couldn't help but wonder when hell y'd made it, but more than that, who'd made it.

Something he luckily quickly got an answer to.

"I was told experts from Altmar Empire visited and assisted in constructing tower for Lady Dawnleaf. Of course y weren't allowed to be in your personal space, so Duskleaf had m make it in a separate one he n merged with your residence," Irin explained. most update novels are published on *novel-fire-net*

"Damn, a lot has happened while I was gone, huh," Jake muttered. "Any or massive news you may as well tell me now so I don't get surprised later?"

Irin looked in thought for a while before answering. "Well, I'm not sure if it's massive in your eyes, but I went to Fourth Hell and met with Demon Prince."

"Oh, how is he doing?" Jake asked curiously. "Last I heard, Devil King re made him his Chosen, so I reckon he's doing well?"

"He's doing quite well indeed," Irin nodded. "In fact, he's very recently gotten engaged to daughter of Devil Queen of Second Hell in quite a momentous union."

"That does sound nice," Jake nodded.

"And he asked me if you'd be interested in being his best man."

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Chapter 1081: Importance of Status

Jake needed a moment as he was pretty sure he'd heard Irin wrong. "He asked me if I wanted to be what?"

"To be his best man... I believe that's what you call it on your planet, right? It may be a bit different, and amongst demons, we call it a prime witness, but there certainly are some similarities," Irin shrugged, still pretty casual about the entire thing.

"Go back a little," Jake shook his head. "What is up with this marriage between two hells? And why would he ask me of all people? I get that I helped him, but I won't say we're close or really know one another."

Irin, clearly enjoying Jake's confused state, gladly explained. "As you well know, we demons put a lot of stock in contracts, and one of the most tried and tested methods to forge alliances is through marriage, especially among demons who put more stock in such unions than nearly every other race. Needless to say, this engagement is political in nature, though the two parties involved do know one another, which is far from a given."

"Yeah, I kinda assumed it was political, but again, why ask me of all people?" Jake continued to be confused. He was not good at being a best man. He already knew that after being Caleb's when he and Maja got married. It had been damn stressful trying to plan everything, and there was no way Jake was going to agree to do that again for some dude he'd only met a couple of times. Plus, Caleb's had been a super small ordeal, while this definitely wouldn't be.

"Being a prime witness does vary a bit from a best man based on what I read. there will be no expectations of you outside of your presence during the day in question, and your primary role will simply be to, well, be there and bear witness," Irin explained. "As for why he asked you... a prime witness always needs to be an outsider, and who you invite is a way to show off status. Having you, Chosen of Malefic Viper, show up will be quite a way to flaunt his connections. It also makes sense, considering your role in elevating his position, and you kinda were the impetus for this entire union in the first place. Also, to clarify, being asked to be a prime witness is usually viewed as a huge honor."

Jake listened and, upon realizing this would very much be a favor to Demon Prince, couldn't help but ask: "What's in it for me? Outside of cake. I assume there will be cake."

"there will definitely be cake, and as for what's in it for you, well, directly paying a prime witness to show up is incredibly shameful, so you won't get anything from Demon Prince or those affiliated with him. However, the other party – in this case, those from Second Hell – will bring gifts to the other side's prime witness, which is to say you, should you agree. This is another subtle competition to see who brought the prime witness that receives the best gifts. Give too bad gifts, and you risk offending the prime witness and whatever faction they may come from, but give too good ones, and you're sure to lose this competition. In your case, I believe Second Hell would willingly lose the competition to try and forge a better relationship with you and Order, which is definitely also what Demon Prince would expect," Irin continued to explain.

"You know, the more I hear, the more exhausting that entire ordeal sounds," Jake sighed. "This is why I prefer courthouse weddings."

"You truly won't need to do anything outside of showing up if you agree," Irin said, with Jake getting a strong feeling she wanted him to agree to go. "Also, I want to clarify that while Demon Prince wanted me to relay his request, he will likely come to officially invite you personally once an actual date has been set. As for when that will be... who knows? There's no time limit on an engagement, and Fourth and Second Hell will definitely have a lot of things to discuss before you move forward. You also need to consider reactions of other Hells. Let's just say that I doubt you are in a rush to buy a new suit."

"If I agree to go," Jake pointed out. "The more I'm hearing about this marriage, the more it just sounds like two factions trying to have a dick-measuring contest, with the entire marriage part of it just a set dressing."

"I can't fault you for thinking that way, but I would still heavily recommend you do. I empathize that it may be hard to understand why you go this far for a social event, but you need to understand that to us, demons, status matters in a far more tangible way than you are used to. It's not simply something chased due to vanity, but how our race works. In the same vein that a king gets Records and even experience based on what his subjects believe about him, we demons also benefit when our fame grows. One example is that as a succubus, I progress not only by actually being near you but by others knowing I'm near you. The fact that you gave me the opportunity to visit Fourth Hell in your stead was massive for my Path."

"That does explain how you got so many levels in so little time," Jake muttered.

"Partly," Irin smiled. "I didn't leave Fourth Hell empty-handed, but was given quite a valuable natural treasure. I've spent about ten months Realtime in Nevermore, taking advantage of time dilation to digest it fully. I will readily admit my progress has been far beyond anything I'd ever expected... I thought reaching C-grade would be a struggle, but now I'm fast approaching B-grade."

"Your speed is definitely impressive," Jake agreed. He knew that due to his Path, he didn't level as fast as some others, but seeing Irin pretty much be caught up was still a little shocking. Just a little, though. He knew that her Path had some crazy synergy going in that the same actions could level up both her profession and race. This did mean that she would share experience and effectively need twice as many Records in that particular aspect of her Path... but Jake's presence had made that a non-issue for the most part.

Jake had casually made Irin his official liaison with the Order of Malefic Viper, and while doing so was indeed just some casual appointment to him, to Irin, it was a momentous thing. There was a big fundamental difference between her just being a person assigned to Jake and Jake actually appointing her.

"I was in Fourth Hell both before and after Malefic One killed Yip of Yore and your subsequent slaying of Ell'Hakan, and let's just say I felt the entire vibe around me shift from one day to another. I also doubt you would have given me a mythical treasure if I had left before you'd killed the Usurper," Irin said, looking Jake directly in the eyes. "I'm fully aware of

who I have to thank for how things are currently going for me, and I'll gladly do anything to allow it to continue. Absolutely *anything*."

"Ree?" a hawk Jake had kind of forgotten was still around asked.

"If Lord Thayne wants me to, n of course," Irin answered politely, though that definitely hadn't been what was on her mind.

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"Ree!" Sylphie screeched happily while throwing looks at Jake.

"Just get her some," Jake sighed, unable to deny Sylphie her happiness. "Guess it gives me a good opportunity to check out what's up with that tower."

"In that case, I'll be right back. Does Lady Sylphie have any preferences?" Irin asked Sylphie what kind of snacks she wanted.

"Ree!" Sylphie answered excitedly.

"Tasty ones it shall be," Irin said with a bow before turning to Jake. "I hope Lord Thayne will also give me opportunity for a tasty snack when convenient."

"I think we can organize something at a more opportune time," Jake gave her a smile in reply, definitely not against idea.

Irin just returned his smile flirtatiously before going through gateway to buy Sylphie her snacks.

"Ree?" bird asked Jake while tilting her head second succubus was gone.

"... you're still way too young in my mind to be asking those kinds of questions," Jake coughed.

"Ree!" Sylphie protested, but Jake refused to engage in that kind of topic with her. Was she technically an around sixty-year-old hawk now? Yes. Did that make Jake comfortable answering her when she asked if Jake was "going to mate with demon later?"

Nope, definitely not.

"Forget all that," Jake desperately tried to change subject. "Let's go check out big tower over re. You remember Meira, right? Maybe she's in re, and who knows, Duskleaf could also be around. Duskleaf is sure to carry around a lot of tasty stuff."

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched happily while flapping her wings before taking to air and motioning Jake to follow.

Happy he’d successfully moved on from that topic, he followed her toward massive white tower. Also, he didn’t speculate if Meira and Duskleaf were in re just to convince Sylphie to go check it out with him. He genuinely didn’t know, as inside of tower was clearly spatially expanded, messing with his Sphere of Perception.

Arriving at barrier surrounding tower, Jake realized it wasn’t made to block access at all. He and Sylphie flew through it effortlessly, and once on or side, he instantly realized its effect.

environment shifted as mana density rose and affinity changed. tower radiated life and light energy, soaking into soil all around it, making it prime ground to grow certain herbs. Upon closely inspecting ground, Jake did find a lot of planted seeds here and re, but it was evident y’d been put re very recently and hadn’t yet had time to sprout.

Continuing toward entrance to tower, Jake checked for any defensive measures but found none. In fact, re wasn’t even a door but just a white glow functioning as a portal. When y landed in front of it, Sylphie took her rightful place on top of Jake’s head as he proceeded to walk inside.

His vision shifted as he did so, before quickly stabilizing, revealing a large circular room. It was mostly empty, with only a few pieces of furniture here and re. only or thing of note was a large teleportation circle in middle, definitely serving as a magical elevator of sorts, leading up to next floor.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked after looking around a bit.

“Yeah, it’s way too empty,” Jake agreed. “I suppose this first floor is meant as some common area to welcome guests. Doesn’t look like it’s quite done yet, though.”

Wanting to explore furr, two of m went to teleporter to head to second floor. Or, y tried to, but nothing happened when Jake stepped on teleportation platform, making him frown. Right as he was about to assess why damn thing didn’t work, a figure appeared right behind him, having teleported in not with help of circle.

“It only works if you’ve been given permission by tower owner or carry a particular kind of token,” newcomer spoke as Jake turned around to greet him.

“Hey, Duskleaf, been a while,” he said politely with a smile as he greeted god.

“Hardly,” old alchemist responded bluntly. “Let me already inform you now that Meira isn’t in tower. In fact, she’s not even in universe.”

“Oh?” Jake exclaimed, surprised. “Did she decide to finally visit Altmar Empire? Or is it Nevermore?”

Those were kind of Jake’s only two guesses, and luckily for him, one of them turned out to be correct.

“Nevermore,” Duskleaf answered. “I’m still a bit worried about her, but we’ve been training in combat a lot, and I believe she was ready. We couldn’t allow her class to fall furr behind than it already was, and she had opportunity to join a good party.”

Jake nodded, genuinely happy to hear that. He knew that Meira and Duskleaf had been training in art of combat a lot, as Meira had never really fought anyone. Healers were one of few classes that could progress a lot without actually fighting anything, but that did mean y could easily end up with high levels but no combat sense. For Duskleaf to judge she was ready to enter Nevermore definitely meant she had improved a lot in that regard.

Even if she was a healer, she had to know how to fight appropriately, as fighting post-system wasn’t like in video games. Enemies didn’t simply ignore healer while only hitting brawny front liners. In fact, most of them would actively aim to take down healer first. This is why having a good party was essential, for healers more than anyone else, and definitely also part of reason Nature’s Attendant had asked Jake to bring Dina along. Even if Dina had been a damn good party member, in pure one-on-one combat, she had definitely been weakest of them.

And, despite how much Meira had no doubt improved... she wasn’t even close to Dina’s level, so she’d definitely need a good party.

“Who did she end up going with?” Jake asked curiously. More out of curiosity than concern, as Duskleaf himself had said that her party was good, and given how protective alchemist god had become of Meira, he knew his standards had to be high.

“Four individuals from Altmar Empire,” Duskleaf answered. “Honestly, above standard of party I would expect her to join. I believe primary reason Altmar Empire approached us was a way to try and get to you through her, and I saw no reason not to take advantage. One of best ways to improve is to be surrounded by your betters, and given how much she still has to learn, I hope her trip will be valuable.”

“Let’s hope so,” Jake smiled and nodded, glad to hear that Meira was doing well for herself and even having some Nevermore fun. As for himself... “Say, can you give me a token so I can check out rest of tower?”

“No,” Duskleaf responded bluntly. “This tower belongs to Meira, so you’ll have to ask her when she returns.”

“Fair enough,” Jake shrugged, not wanting to push it. If Meira didn’t want him in tower, who was he to try and force himself in? Yeah, best to just respect her privacy.

“Ree?” Sylphie suddenly asked, having seen her opportunity to ask.

old alchemist looked at her for a moment before nodding. “I do have an ingredient I found no need for, but that may prove useful to a creature of your disposition and power level.”

Duskleaf proceeded to take out what looked like a small bundle of sticks rolled up into a ball, and before Jake even had time to use Identify, Sylphie swooped over and gulped thing down before letting out a delighted screech.

Jake looked at Duskleaf with some concern, but alchemist shook his head. “It’s perfectly safe.”

“Ree!” Sylphie confirmed, happy to have gotten a snack.

“You little glutton,” Jake shook his head and smiled before looking back at Duskleaf. “What are you up to recently? And has anything interesting happened recently that you think I should know?”

“I’m working on my projects as always, and no, outside of what happened with Meira, nothing new,” Duskleaf said. “Though I will say things are way less stressful now that Master finally killed Yip of Yore.” Fresh chapters posted on [novel•fire•net](#)

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Jake nodded.

“Speaking of projects... I see no reason to keep this clone here with Meira gone, so I shall put it to work,” Duskleaf said and, without any furr warning, teleported away.

“Well, I guess that was it for our tower exploration,” Jake said nonchalantly as he walked out of tower again. Shortly after, he and Sylphie were back at mansion, waiting for Irin to return with Sylphie’s snacks.

Jake considered wher he should maybe do a concoction or two while waiting, but just n, he had a figure teleport in from out of nowhere for second time that day. This second newcomer was different from first in one fundamental way, though...

Because he’d brought beer.

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Chapter 1082: Impeccable Comedic Timing

Right after Jake noticed arrival of god, Sylphie also reacted as her head perked up, and she looked around a bit frantically. Quickly, she realized who it was that had arrived as she jumped off Jake's head with a small screech.

"Ree!" she said, making Jake nod in understanding.

"Fair enough, you go fly around a bit," Jake didn't argue as Sylphie decided to give Jake and newly arrived god some space to talk in peace. In meanwhile, she would fly around a bit outside and play. He knew that while Sylphie was borderline immune to presence of gods, she still felt a bit uncomfortable around god who'd brought him beer. Which, to be fair, all but a handful of beings in entire multiverse did.

After watching her fly out door, Jake finally decided to greet newcomer, and he couldn't suppress his smile as he walked into living room and found table filled with beer and snacks, along with an ancient snake god lounging on couch. Read complete version only at *novel*fire*net*

"You know, I'm beginning to question just how private this private residence really is with gods just teleporting in and out all day. This is already second time today," Jake said jokingly as Villy looked up at him.

"You're at most just renting this place, making me your landlord," snake god answered in turn. "And sadly for you, Order of Malefic Viper doesn't have strong tenant protection laws, allowing landlord to make unannounced visits at any time for any reason."

"I will say, even if my old landlord broke in like this, I could have at least found it somewhat acceptable if he brought good beer every time," Jake shook his head as he went over and took a seat in one of lounge chairs opposite of Villy.

"Oh, I'll just add price of beverages to your rent."

"Now that's definitely illegal," Jake countered.

"Sue me," Villy shrugged jokingly. "I'm both jury, judge, and executioner within Order of Malefic Viper."

"Quite a broken legal system if you ask me," Jake kept joke going.

"Only if you're not part of in-group. Sure, for everyone else, it sucks, but as ones in power, we benefit, so who cares?" Primordial said, and at this point, joke was beginning to feel a bit too real.

"I guess that's just terms of living under a tyrant," Jake shook his head.

"Says one tyrant to anor," Villy countered.

"Touché, I guess," Jake had to admit defeat as he couldn't really argue against that. y kind of were two dictators who'd forcibly taken over ir respective territories through power and intimidation, though Jake would argue he at least tried not to be too bad with World Council and all that.

Villy just smiled as he waved his hand and popped two caps off bottles before making one float to Jake and or to himself. Jake gladly grabbed it and took a swig, instantly feeling potent toxin burn its way down his throat.

sensation was incredibly odd, and Jake couldn't help but cough a time or two as he looked up at snake god. "Damn, what hell is this?"

"Homebrew," Villy answered casually as he also took a drink himself. "Not mine, mind you. It's quite a unique product, very popular among certain alchemists due to exotic mix of toxic materials used during brewing process."

"Who did you buy it from?" Jake asked before taking anor slurp, once more feeling his body getting burned from inside. Again, it felt weird... a little painful for sure, but with a very pleasant after-taste. Overall? Not too bad.

"Who said I bought it? Lots of larger merchant organizations have begun to expand ir presence within Order territory recently, and this batch was part of ir bribery to be allowed to set up shop," snake god answered casually. "I just swiped it from one of warehouses as quality seemed good."

"Fair enough," Jake said, not even boring to comment on fact that apparently bribery was simply viewed as a normal way to get a store within Order territory. Instead, he switched topic. "Say, how are you doing after digesting your gains from your fight with Yip of Yore? Everything as it should be?"

This was Jake's first time meeting snake god after he killed Yip, and Jake could feel some subtle changes to Villy's aura. He couldn't quite place his finger on why it felt different, but something had undoubtedly changed.

"It's as expected," Villy answered, also turning more serious. "I've finished active portion, and now I just have to wait for passive digestion to finish. As for how long that'll take... who knows, but it won't be just a few years."

"What do you mean when you say active and passive portion of digestion?" Jake asked curiously.

Villy seemed to understand that Jake was fishing for knowledge on how Legacy skill worked as he gladly obliged. "My version of Palate is naturally quite a bit more advanced than yours. Right now, when you consume something, you consume all of its Records – save for massive wastage during process - which isn't really bad, at least not for a mortal. For me, however, I need to be more... selective with what kind of Records I want to integrate into my Path. I also can't be as wasteful. Someone like Yip of Yore naturally had a lot of Records, but I only needed some of m. active digestion portion allows me to prime food, so to speak. I make it so Records I don't want serve to only nourish ones I do, allowing me to get as much out of process as possible, and while total quantity I absorb is undoubtedly reduced from doing this, quality is greatly heightened."

Jake was nodding along during explanation, instantly realizing that some serious control was required to make such a thing happen. To pick and choose Records like that couldn't be easy, and as Villy had said, it wasn't necessary either in nearly all cases. At least not for mortals. That's not to say it couldn't be helpful in some fringe instances. He also still had some questions.

"Does it work if you consume multiple things? Like, could you eat another god and use its Records to nourish ones from Yip of Yore you want, increasing your gains?" Jake questioned.

"No, I can't even eat a second god that easily. Well, not in a way that allows me to absorb its Records like this anyway," snake god explained. "Consuming Yip of Yore took a lot of preparation and even a bit of sacrifice. Also, I'm not simply absorbing Records. I'm also replacing some of those I had. As I said, it's a lot more complex than you need to bother understanding right now. In fact, I think you should focus more on your current Palate, considering how it's still broken."

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"Yeah, about that..." Jake sighed. "I'm looking into a solution, but it will take a while. Did you happen to find a way to heal it?"

"Nothing concrete that doesn't involve massive risk," snake god shook his head. "You will need to heal it sooner rather than later, though. There is a chance it stops you from evolving your profession to B-grade, and even if it doesn't, evolving with a damaged skill is a very unwise thing to do. I am still looking into solutions, but fixing that kind of soul damage isn't easy, especially not considering you caused it with your Bloodline, making damage Transcendent in nature. I could also only temporarily address it with my own Transcendence, but that means the only way to fix it fully is by using another Transcendence. That, or you manage to heal it on your own, effectively getting help of a system with that method."

"I always planned on getting it fixed before evolving," Jake said, shaking his head. "It's part of what I'm working on with improving my Meditate skill. It also sounded like that would be best solution according to First Sage."

"n just continue working on that," Primordial said, not questioning for a second if that would be for best if First Sage had suggested it. "I can already feel that your soul has grown from encounter with Master, and I'm sure that if you follow his Legacy, it will continue to do so."

Jake nodded, already looking forward to his next meditation session.

"Speaking of Records and Legacies..." Viper said. He raised his hand, palm-up, and on it, an odd circular object that looked like a small egg covered in scales, making Jake use Identify without really thinking about it.

[Refined Record Fragment of Yip of Yore (???) – Contains Records related to fallen god, Yip of Yore.

"Looks neat," Jake said, unsure what to say about it. "What's it for? A small snack for later?"

"It's for you," Villy smiled. "Well, it will be for you after you've addressed your issue with Palate. I originally planned on having you consume it using Palate with me actively guiding you during process of consuming it, but re may be a better usage. Can you show me what you got from slaying Usurper?"

"Sure," Jake said, seeing no reason not to as he took out his singular drop from killing Ell'Hakan. odd crystal heart appeared, and Jake also used Identify on this for good measure.

[Starlight Heart of Celestial Child (Unique)] – crystalized heart of Ell'Hakan, also known as Celestial Child, former Chosen and Usurper of Yip of Yore. This Starlight Heart was created after his death, containing his Records. Contains remnants of Bloodline of [Redacted], granting it unique powers. This item allows you to [Redacted] while held. Additionally, if consumed, Starlight Heart of Celestial Child may grant consumer [Redacted]. May powers of moons and stars guide you.

"You figured out any of its functions yet?" Villy asked while studying Starlight Heart closely.

"None," Jake shook his head. "It says it allows me to do something while holding it, but I've yet to figure out what that might be... but to be fair, I haven't experimented much. It's clearly related to his Bloodline, and knowing how fucked up that was, I don't wanna mess with Starlight Heart too much."

“Probably a wise choice,” snake god nodded. “Having an item containing remnants of a Bloodline is incredibly rare, and it makes m dangerous by default. Its effects might be Transcendent in nature, making it a threat even to someone like me. Though, considering system, I doubt heart has any directly offensive properties. You may end up fucking up your own emotions considering how Bloodline worked, though, so I would still be very careful.”

“Hey... I’ve kind of been thinking, since it contains remnants of Bloodline, does that mean this Starlight Heart could be used to give rise to his Bloodline again? Like, could Records be transplanted into a living person somehow, or could a creature be born using item as a catalyst?” Jake asked, already knowing that if answer was yes, his very next action would be to just get rid of damn thing for good.

“No,” Villy quickly shot down that notion. “Bloodlines and Truesouls are bound together intrinsically. This item has no soul power whatsoever. Even if you somehow managed to use item to give birth to some creature with your Primeval Origins abilities, it won’t have a Bloodline. It may get a skill or have its race be affected by properties Bloodline had, but that’s about it.”

“Alright... good,” Jake sighed in relief. “Doesn’t mean I have any idea what to use it for, though. I still find it too risky of an object to even experiment with, and re’s definitely no way in hell I’m gonna eat it. When you use Identify on it, does it also have redacted portions?”

“It does,” god nodded in confirmation. “It will for everyone, I’d reckon. Besides anyone who actually has Bloodline, that is, but considering grand total of people like that is zero, no one will be able to see what it does simply through Identify. It will require experimentation... or for you to eat it using special stomach of Palate to learn more about it in a safe way.”

“I could do that... though I’m still considering just getting rid of it for good,” Jake sighed.

“Understandable in some ways, but I would heavily advise against it. Think about it like this: Bloodline was powerful, of that, re is no doubt. It only makes sense item has some powerful function, too, right? If you can identify those functions, I have a little item here you may just be able to use to empower m. Once you do that, you can use Starlight Heart to create something truly useful.”

Jake now finally understood what Villy meant as he looked at Record Fragment from Yip of Yore. “I guess because Records of Eli’Hakan and Yip mixed after he became a Usurper, merging two items won’t be overly difficult...”

“It won’t be too easy either, and you will need my active participation to make it happen,” Villy shrugged. “But I can see you craft something truly powerful if you empower and give Starlight Heart some direction... assuming it has any useful functions at all, that is.

If not, you can always just use it as a catalyst for some ritual or maybe just use Starlight Heart to empower Record Fragment.”

“Definitely food for thought,” Jake said, popping open another bottle of beer after having finished the first one. “But such things in good time. As you said, I’ll need to fix Palate first before it’s even worth thinking about any of that.”

“Let’s hope you can find time to do that while visiting Panon of Life. I have a feeling you will be quite busy doing or things – or people – once re,” Villy said teasingly.

“And even after that, I might just be busy apparently going to a wedding in Nine Hells,” Jake sighed, choosing to completely ignore obvious teasing.

“That thing? You got time, no worries,” Viper waved it off. “demons are notoriously slow planning stuff like that, and seeing as you haven’t even been officially invited yet, it’s obvious no actual date has been decided on either. I wouldn’t be surprised if it takes well over a decade before a date is even set.”

“Irin did say something similar,” Jake nodded. “Do you think I should go when time comes?”

“Are you asking me that as a friend or as your Patron? Because as your Patron, I would naturally tell you to go. While Order of Malefic Viper does have an established alliance with some of the clans in Nine Hells, we don’t have any deep connection with Fourth Hell, and having you go there as a prime witness would be an obvious way to begin building some connections,” Malefic Viper answered.

“Now, as your friend... I don’t really care. You might get some interesting gifts from going, including things that Order cannot provide you as you are unique to Nine Hells, but outside of that, you won’t gain much by going. Not that you’ll lose anything, either. I think it all boils down to if you want to nurture a friendly relationship with that little Demon Prince. Doing so could prove useful in the future.”

“I guess I should just go when time comes... as you said, it’s not like I’ll lose anything by doing so, while I’ll at least get some free donations simply by showing up and witnessing the party. Plus, I’ll get to see what a demon wedding looks like, which should at least be a novel experience,” Jake shrugged.

“And you’ll make that succubus of yours happy. Especially if you bring her along to the entire thing, I’m sure she’ll be more than eager to reward you personally, continually, and perhaps even a bit freakishly,” Villy said, fully back to teasing Jake again.

And what an incredible time to say this, considering the succubus they were talking about had returned just before Villy started his sentence. From the look on his face, the snake god had damn well known she was coming, and he was oh-so-proud of his impeccable comedic timing.

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Chapter 1083: Private Discussions Of Vastly Different Natures

Jake watched through his sphere as Irin stumbled in hallway and had to lean on wall for support. She was breathing heavily and didn't look good at all, making Jake a bit worried.

It was evident that Viper's aura was overwhelming for her, making Jake look at snake god with narrowed eyes. "Rein it in a bit."

Villy looked at Jake for a moment before sighing. "Fine. Just saying it's so much more relaxing to just let it out."

Jake just continued looking at god, who continued smiling as his aura weakened and was suppressed. It wasn't really something Jake usually paid attention to, but Viper hadn't bored to restrain his aura in slightest ever since he appeared. That had probably contributed to Sylphie not being a fan of sticking around and was definitely reason why Irin looked on brink of collapse.

Usually, when Villy or any of god visited, y actively suppressed ir own auras so as not to make mortals keel over. Of course, this time around, only mortals present had been Jake and Sylphie, meaning Villy hadn't bored as neir was significantly affected by his presence.

Villy, while still slowly lowering intensity of his aura, finished beer he'd been sitting with before he sighed. "You know, I don't think we have anything overly urgent to discuss anymore. At least not anything we can't talk about at any or time. So, I think I'm just gonna leave you two alone for now."

god stood up and stretched a bit before yawning. "I'll stop by again with some things for you to bring along when you go to Panon of Life. Gifts and stuff. I expect you'll be leaving within week, correct?"

"Probably," Jake nodded. "I will need to stock up on alchemy ingredients before going, as I'm not confident y will have many death affinity herbs in Panon of Life."

"I think you'll be surprised, but stocking up here is still a good idea," god nodded.

"Anyway, have fun. Oh, and one final thing... just so you know, a certain swordsman just

paid a visit to some very interested vampires. So he may be stuck re for a while unless you go fetch him yourself when it's time for you to leave."

"Thanks for heads-up," Jake said before god did an exaggerated bow, still looking Jake in eyes. "With that, I say my goodbyes..."

He teleported away, and right after, a voice echoed in Jake's mind through ir bond as Chosen and Patron. *"For now, anyway. You can always just reach out if anything pops up. I won't bor you anymore... just remind you that your mansion does have a privacy feature if you don't want anyone entering unwanted. To make it even better, I'll even be nice and respect it, so you just go ahead and do what one does when in private."*

With those words, Viper instantly cut off connection again, making Jake sigh as he slowly headed for hallway outside living room. Irin was still working on getting her bearings, and Jake purposefully gave her some extra time to do so. While Villy had reduced his aura, succubus had still suffered under it for longer than most could comfortably handle.

While aura of a god could never be lethal unless y actively infused energy into it with intent to kill, it wasn't an outlier for mortals to be knocked out when in presence of one. If Irin had seen Viper directly and didn't have a wall and closed door between m, he had a strong feeling she would be part of that statistic.

Or maybe not. Irin had been affected by Jake's own presence for at least some time, which should have passively helped her better resist auras. Evidently far from enough, but hopefully, that was something y would fix with time.

Thinking he'd waited enough, Jake finally opened door and went out to hallway where Irin was waiting. By now, she no longer looked like she was about to faint but had managed to stand up straight. Jake had gone re with intent of comforting her as she had to be feeling like shit... but to his surprise, she seemed in an excellent mood despite her state.

"Are you okay?" Jake asked, a bit concerned. People didn't usually smile while looking as haggard as she currently was.

"I'm perfectly fine," Irin kept smiling. "I just need a moment."

"Alright," Jake said, still concerned. Seeing as Irin still looked a bit wobbly on her legs, he motioned for her to maybe come and take a seat in living room, something she gladly agreed to as Jake allowed her to lean on him as he helped her in re.

In fact, she leaned on him perhaps a bit too much, and from way she walked, she clearly wasn't as affected as she let on. Still, Jake let it go as he soon sat down on couch with her, succubus still leaning against him.

y were both silent for a few seconds before Jake spoke. "So... did shopping go well?"

"It did," she answered briefly.

"That's good," Jake nodded.

Irin kept leaning furr into Jake, and at this point, it was very clear she was doing it entirely on purpose.

"We should go give Sylphie snacks you brought," Jake said after a little while.

"Can you do it? I'm still feeling a little woozy and may need to lie down a bit. Preferably in bedroom," she said, looking up at him.

"Sounds like a good idea," Jake nodded, not dense enough to fail to understand what she was hinting at. "I'll come check on you after I've fed hawk."

Irin just smiled as she summoned a few trays of what looked a lot like sushi. Jake stood up and grabbed m as he headed outside, and through his sphere, he saw Irin get up and walk toward bedroom.

Once outside, Sylphie quickly flew over to him, giving him a questioning look.

"Viper left, but not before Irin returned," Jake explained why he had her snacks. "She was blasted by his aura for a while and is resting right now... I'll go check on her, but I think it's best you stay outside to give her some peace and quiet."

Was it a good excuse?

No.

Did Sylphie buy excuse?

Also no.

"Ree?" bird asked.

As for if Jake answered her...

"Just go enjoy your snacks, okay?" Jake said after placing m all down on a table before heading into manor again. After doing so, he activated a formation he hadn't really ever used before.

It was magical version of a home security system, and once he turned it on, all of windows blacked out, doors locked, and powerful defensive and isolation barriers

activated all over mansion, effectively locking it down. Even if Sylphie wanted to break in now, she couldn't.

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Right as he activated it, Villy also stopped observing him, but not before sending one final teasing message that Jake promptly ignored.

Heading upstairs to bedroom, he found a few pieces of clothing on way, making him speed up a bit. door to bedroom was already open, and Irin was lying re, leaning against headboard in her underwear.

"You seem to be feeling better already?" Jake couldn't help but joke a bit.

Irin just smiled and looked at him, not in a joking mood. "You know, I heard what Malefic One said..."

"Yeah, he can be a bit much and likes messing around," Jake sighed. He assumed that having ors talk about you like that wasn't most comfortable feeling, so he could understand if Irin wasn't very pleased with-

"That means re's no reason to hold back, now, is re?" Irin kept smiling flirtatiously. "You know... my biggest worry was what Malefic One thought about me. A low-level succubus hired to work for Order, daring to even try and get close to his Chosen... I halfway expected to get smote from existence one day if I went too far. However, knowing that he doesn't outright disapprove..."

Lifting her finger, she tapped her underwear once as it slowly began fading away, and at that point, Jake had to agree with her earlier statement that re really wasn't any reason to hold back.

--

Sword Saint stored away last of painting supplies he'd purchased, hoping y would tide him over for now. He had to admit that Order of Malefic Viper had quite an excellent selection, and having a personal guide to help him find what he needed was very useful.

"Where does My Lord wish to go next?" succubus who'd been assigned to him asked.

Miyamoto considered for a while before deciding. "Would you be a dear and show me where I may get in touch with vampires belonging to Order of Malefic Viper? I believe it's high time we have a discussion."

"Most certainly," demon bowed, clearly trying to show off her assets while doing so. Sadly for her, Sword Saint wasn't interested in slightest. Getting too close to a member of Order of Malefic Viper in such a fashion seemed unwise.

Following demon, y went to anor teleportation gate. Miyamoto really did need a guide to get anywhere, as while he'd been given a guest token allowing him to use gateways himself, that didn't mean he had any idea how y really worked. He'd tried, and while he could intellectually recognize entire setup was relatively intuitive, it still reminded him of first time he had to use one of those computers.

After going through yet anor gate, Sword Saint and succubus found mselves in an entirely new environment. sky was dark, and affinities in atmosphere barely held any light affinity at all. If Sword Saint had ever imagined what a district vampires lived in would look like, this would definitely fit bill.

"Which of vampire clans do you wish to get in contact with?" succubus asked.

"I'm uncertain if it matters, but If I could speak with eir ones holding most authority or ones Chosen of Malefic Viper worked with before, that would be preferable," Miyamoto answered.

He saw no reason not to leverage his relationship with Jake in a situation like this. Everyone already knew he was close to Chosen of Malefic Viper, fact y'd been in a Nevermore party known to most people. He reckoned that speaking to people who already knew of Jake would make matters easier.

"Nalkar vampires it shall be, n," demon nodded, showing her competence once more by clearly knowing which vampires Jake had been in contact with before.

It didn't take long before y arrived at a large residence, and right outside of it, a male vampire wearing a suit was already waiting.

"I greet Lord Noboru," vampire bowed politely. "Patriarch has expected your arrival and is waiting for you inside."

"Oh?" Sword Saint exclaimed surprised. He looked at succubus, but she looked equally confused, making him believe she hadn't been one to tip m off he was visiting.

"We are aware of your clan, including presence of vampires within it," man explained. "Patriarch has looked forward to your visit for a long time, and I hope you will accept his invitation."

"I did come here to speak with someone of high rank, so Patriarch seems fitting," Miyamoto nodded.

"I shall wait out here till you're done," succubus said.

"No need," Sword Saint shook his head. "I plan on heading straight to meet Chosen of Malefic Viper after this, and I believe I can find my own way. If not, I'm certain Nalkar would gladly assist me."

demon didn't look happy at rejection, but Sword Saint wanted to draw a line in sand right away. She seemed to quickly realize that he wasn't prey she could use to advance her Path as she bowed.

"Very well. I wish my Lord success in his endeavors, and please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you ever need anything. My contact information is within your token," she said, still leaving door open should Miyamoto change his mind.

"I will," he said with a nod before turning to vampire. "Please lead way."

"Most certainly," young male vampire answered as he escorted Sword Saint into residence. Walking through hallways, Sword Saint admired architecture that took him back to some of older residences he'd visited in foreign countries during his youth.

Soon enough, y arrived at a large banquet hall where young vampire stopped outside. "Please enter. Patriarch is waiting within."

Sword Saint simply nodded, seeing no need to be overly courteous as he entered hall. Inside, he saw a single older-looking vampire standing at a side table, admiring an old goblet.

He immediately noticed Miyamoto as he turned his head and smiled. "Finally, we meet. As one Patriarch of a family to anor, I greet you and humbly welcome you to abode of Nalkar Family."

"pleasure is all mine," Sword Saint nodded politely in greeting. "I have heard much of Sir Fairleigh from Chosen of Malefic One, and I've been looking forward to finally meeting you."

When Sword Saint said he'd heard much about him from Jake, he wasn't entirely lying... Jake had ranted about time he visited a bunch of hoarder vampires on quite a few occasions. To be fair to Jake, he had also given some actually useful information about vampires.

"I hope Chosen is doing well," Fairleigh said with a smile. "But let us focus on why you are here and what we can do for one anor."

"Of course," Sword Saint nodded, and after two of m comfortably sat down and had some tea served, real discussion could begin.

"As you know, Noboru clan has explored Path of vampirism for a while, but we have done so in a mostly isolated fashion," Sword Saint began to explain. "I visit today with hope that perhaps an exchange of knowledge can take place, and with universe beginning to open up, I see no better time. I hope that such an exchange can benefit many vampires of my clan, allowing m to learn more about what y have become... and perhaps even history of ir heritage."

He added final part, knowing just how much Fairleigh loved talking about and exploring history. From how vampire smiled, it had clearly worked. "I would be more than happy to make that happen, and I'm sure there are many C-grade vampires who would love to visit your planet. However, before that, I do have some questions of my own." Newest update provided by **novel~fire~net**

"Of course," Sword Saint nodded, already having a very good idea of what vampire wanted to ask about.

"I have seen some of vampires from your clan, and quite a few of my family members have also interacted with me in and around Nevermore, and from that, I noticed something. I cannot place my finger on how you came to be. What's more, many of me possess powerful variants rarely seen since first generations of vampires. I hope it will be possible for you to share with me how Noboru clan managed to become vampires in first place, as origin of transformation isn't one I recognize," Fairleigh asked big question you both knew would be coming.

Sword Saint had considered for a long time if he would risk exposing item he'd gained during Treasure Hunt and had decided that benefits now outweighed risk.

"I do hope this can stay between you and me, as very few people know this," Sword Saint began. "During a system event, Chosen of Malefic Viper, myself, and many of elites of Earth entered something known as Treasure Hunt, which happened to take place in ancient world of Yalsten..."

Miyamoto proceeded to explain what had happened, naturally leaving out quite a few details here and there but still touching on essential parts. Fairleigh had clearly known a lot of what Sword Saint said, but he still listened with great interest as tale was soon over.

"In the end, I obtained a reward directly from Monarch of Blood," Sword Saint said in a serious tone. "Something left behind by Sanguine himself."

At hearing mention of first vampire, Fairleigh perked up with great interest... and he nearly fell over when Sword Saint took out actual item.

necklace appeared and floated in air, looking rare inconspicuous, but a quick Identify confirmed this artifact was far from normal. Having had it in his possession for a while, Sword Saint could now see more information related to it, even if he was certain some of its features remained obscured to him.

[Sanguine's Blood Legacy (Divine)] – A Legacy item left behind by first-ever vampire and creator of vampiric race, Sanguine. Within resides soul of vampire known as Iskar, which can be manifested in a limited fashion. Using Sanguine's Blood Legacy, Sanguine's Gift can be granted to any consenting and compatible creature, allowing me to evolve into vampires.

re were several seconds of silence before Fairleigh spoke in a serious tone. “I... we... might need to consider bringing one of True Ancestors into this.”

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Chapter 1084: Sword Saint's Vampire Adventure

Sword Saint was fully aware that Blood Legacy was far from an ordinary treasure, but perhaps he'd slightly underestimated it still. He'd assumed that while treasure was definitely important, it wasn't necessarily to level where gods needed to be involved.

Perhaps that was just his own lack of understanding. Seeing as item had come from a D-grade system event, he halfway expected to hear that re were many such Blood Legacies out re. Miyamoto had no information on how many Sanguine had created, much less if system had stepped in and manually produced more.

Seeing look on Nalkar Family Patriarch's face, it appeared that se Blood Legacies weren't a dime a dozen. This made him question why system had rewarded such a rare and important item as final reward for a low-level system event, but that was a topic he was confident he could ponder on for a long time without ever finding a good answer.

After having taken his time to think a bit, Sword Saint nodded. “Very well. If you believe it best to involve gods in this matter, I shall leave it up to your judgment.”

Fairleigh still looked a bit out of it as he kept closely studying necklace. “Would it be acceptable if I reach out to True Ancestor of Nalkar Lineage? If you wish for anor True Ancestor, I can try to make that happen, but-“

“As I said, I leave it up to your judgment,” Miyamoto reiterated.

Truthfully, he still lacked a lot of knowledge when it came to vampires. He knew that re were six families part of Order and that until recently, se families had merely been viewed as a bunch of mortals under protection of Order of Malefic Viper.

However, after Viper's return to universe, many vampire gods who'd been in hiding suddenly revealed mselves, including a few True Ancestors – first gods of each vampire Lineage. re had been far more than anyone expected, showing that vampiric race truly was outstanding, as despite being in hiding and suppressed by several major factions of multiverse, se six vampire families had still managed to nurture over a hundred gods over eras.

What's more, not a single vampire had defected during recent clash with Yip of Yore, elevating ir status furr due to ir loyalty. Of course, out of any race, vampires had most incentive to stay loyal, as re was no way Yip of Yore would have shielded m against Risen and Holy Church same way Malefic Viper currently did.

Needless to say, True Ancestors, who also led each of ir respective vampire families, were quite influential now. So, by having one come to check out divine artifact left by Sanguine – someone se True Ancestors had known in person – things had gotten quite a bit more risky. If y demanded ownership, Miyamoto wasn't confident he had any ground to stand on.

Plus, vampires were known to be emotional, heightening risk furr. Sure, True Ancestor had to know that acting aggressive or harming him wouldn't be looked kindly upon by his Patron nor Malefic One, but when emotions got overly involved, logic often went out window.

Nevertheless, he believed it was ultimately worth risk. Noboru clan had a lot of vampires by now, and y would have to make contact with ir kin in rest of multiverse at one point or anor. Coming to Order would be a great opportunity for m, and if Miyamoto could facilitate an alliance between his clan and vampires, he would gladly do so. Even if he wasn't as involved with being Patriarch anymore, he still held that title and felt a sense of responsibility.

After Sword Saint had answered, Fairleigh had already gone off to side and kneeled down in prayer. He was blessed by True Ancestor of Nalkar Vampires, so he had a direct connection to her. As for what level of Blessing he had, Sword Saint didn't know. His Identify didn't tell him that kind of thing.

On a side note, he did find it a bit humorous to see a vampire praying, considering ir mythology on Earth before system. Of course, now he knew that y didn't fear things like crosses or garlic. Sunlight weakening m was still kind of a thing, considering that vampires were all weak to light affinity. As for stakes through heart... well, a good stab through heart tended to be an effective way to deal damage to most anything.

About a minute passed as Fairleigh prayed before he finally opened his eyes and spoke. "True Ancestor is coming." Find newest release on [movel*fire*met](#)

Sword Saint nodded in acknowledgment. "Is re anything I should know beforehand?"

"Act as you are... as a C-grade, it may be difficult for you to be in presence of a god of her caliber, but I hope you can retain your bearings. As someone blessed by her, I'm less affected by True Ancestor's aura, but even I find it difficult to be in her presence for too long at a time," Fairleigh explained.

"I understand," Sword Saint nodded. He didn't take warning lightly eir. He wasn't Jake, who seemingly had a total immunity to presences. As a Transcendent, he had higher

presence resistance than ors, but Miyamoto still wasn't sure how strong his resistance was at this point. He hoped that his status as a Transcendent and passive improvements from being around Jake would be enough to not lose all dignity in front of god.

As expected, it didn't take long before True Ancestor arrived. Sword Saint felt powerful presence descend before any physical form appeared, and he had to stabilize himself and calm his mind as it happened.

In next second, in a swirl of blood, a woman appeared. She wore a black and white dress with a very conservative design that showed little skin. It reminded him a bit of what noble women usually wore in old period pieces. Her aura was also quite terrifying, and Sword Saint could faintly smell scent of blood simply from her presence re.

Despite pressure, Sword Saint managed to remain calm. He could recognize her power, and while he couldn't properly assess just how powerful she was, he assumed she had to be at least a Godqueen, and if not, at least very close.

It was odd, but while his logical mind told him just how terrifying she was, his body remained stable. At that moment, he realized that he'd likely underestimated effects of spending better part of fifty years in Nevermore around Jake. Because, despite everything, a small thought couldn't help but creep into his mind as he stood before True Ancestor.

I've felt worse.

Usually, to a normal mortal, any god was too much. Be y a newly ascended weak god or a Primordial, before a mortal, it barely mattered. Yet to Sword Saint, he remained able to not only stand tall but also evaluate woman who stood before him.

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mere fact I can even consider her a woman and not simply a vastly superior being is also a sign, he furr reminded himself.

His lack of reaction also clearly surprised True Ancestor, but not as much as necklace that floated in middle of room. She entirely ignored Fairleigh and Miyamoto as she teleported over and reached out toward it, barely stopping herself before touching it.

"You got this through a system event?" vampire asked rhetorically after a few seconds. "Yalsten, you said. I remember that it was lost... entrance severed from multiverse. It appears system chose to recycle it and allow what was left by His Lordship to emerge once more."

Sword Saint remained silent as she spoke, clearly reminiscing on some very old memories. After a few seconds, she finally turned to look at him. "You are human who calls himself Sword Saint, correct?"

"I am one who chose such an arrogant title for myself, yes," Miyamoto bowed toward god. "And as you said, Blood Legacy stems from Yalsten. From my understanding, system chose to freeze time of world at some point, only to restart it once it was used for system event."

"I see," she muttered, evaluating Miyamoto with her eyes. "You are quite a unique figure... perhaps one worthy of having taken such an arrogant title as you so accurately pointed it out to be."

"If you want to reach a goal, you must set one in your mind first. I do not call myself that because I believe myself qualified right now, but because I strive to one day be worthy," Sword Saint answered honestly.

vampire evaluated him for a few moments more before smiling. "You are an interesting mortal. My name is Karine, True Ancestor of Nalkar Lineage and one of leaders of vampiric race. Now, please, do tell me everything you know about this artifact. I've not seen one like it for... I don't even know how many eras."

"I believe there is someone more qualified than I to speak on it," Sword Saint said as he reached out and touched necklace. He infused some energy into it with intent of waking up soul slumbering within.

His goal was to summon Iskar, who was effectively steward of Sanguine's Blood Legacy. He had been less active in recent years, and while he could still speak relatively frequently, manifesting himself outside of Blood Legacy had become harder more Sword Saint grew in power.

Sword Saint knew that part of reason why it had gotten harder was Iskar's attempt to strengthen his own soul. former Monarch of Blood wanted to become more than a soul bound to an item, and even if he couldn't free himself, he at least wanted more autonomy with how often he could manifest his own body.

As a reminder, Blood Legacy was not a Soulbound item. In many ways, its only real owner was Iskar, meaning Iskar was also one who decided who could use divine artifact. He'd gone along with Jake and Sword Saint's bet during Treasure Hunt, forming a connection with Miyamoto, allowing him to control Blood Legacy for most part. However, that didn't mean item couldn't change owners if Iskar willed it to.

This was another reason why visiting these vampires – and especially interacting with a True Ancestor – was incredibly risky. If Iskar decided that it was best to stay with him, Sword Saint had little recourse.

Even so, if that was what Iskar decided on, he could only accept it. ancient vampire had already helped Miyamoto and Noboru clan a lot, and Sword Saint even considered him somewhat of a friend so he would respect Iskar's decision.

About a second passed after Sword Saint had infused his energy into artifact before soul within stirred to life. True Ancestor and Fairleigh both looked on with keen interest as mostly illusory figure of Iskar manifested.

Opening his eyes, Iskar was definitely also surprised, and he stared at Karine for several seconds before he spoke. *"You... no, this is impossible; you cannot be True Ancestor of Nalkar..."*

Sword Saint had not expected Iskar to recognize her, but in retrospect, perhaps he should have. If she were a True Ancestor, it meant she had likely been alive and even a god during time Yalsten was isolated from rest of universe. As one of most important figures of entire vampire race, it wasn't odd if Iskar had at least seen a picture of her.

"Iskar of Yalsten," Karine spoke. "Or perhaps it's more fitting to call you Iskar of Blood Legacy now..."

"Are you truly ...?" former Monarch of Blood asked, unsure as Sword Saint confirmed it.

"She is," he nodded. "To bring you up to speed, we are currently within Order of Malefic Viper, more accurately, in a residence owned by Nalkar Family. I have come here hoping to establish a connection between my Noboru clan and vampires of Order."

That final explanation for his presence was as much for Iskar as it was for Karine, as he wasn't sure if Fairleigh had relayed reason for his visit.

"I... it's an honor to meet True Ancestor," Iskar bowed deeply.

"So is it an honor to meet one entrusted with such an important task," Karine returned his polite bow. "I hope to learn more from you about what exactly purpose of this Blood Legacy is."

"Oh, naturally," Iskar answered enthusiastically. *"My purpose is to allow continued proliferation of vampiric race in multiverse. Despite death of True Ancestor of all vampires, he didn't wish to see his life's work fall to ruin, so he made certain contingencies. I am one of those contingencies. That's also why my soul resides within, so I can guide newly born vampires early on in their Path."*

Iskar continued to explain a while longer, and Karine and Fairleigh silently listened. Sword Saint also kept quiet, already knowing all of what was said. reason why he had

Iskar explain everything wasn't out of laziness, but for legitimacy. words of an ancient vampire soul had to hold more value in eyes of or vampires.

After he was done speaking, Sword Saint decided to chime in, though. "I myself have wondered why this artifact was even placed in a system event for newly integrated universe. Especially seeing as it happened so long after original fall of your True Ancestor. Moreover, it appears that while all newly initiated enlightened got ir own Treasure Hunts, I've yet to hear of anyone else with one related to vampires. I seriously doubt it was a coincidence that one system event with vampires in it also happened to be one where Chosen of Malefic Viper took part. Especially not with it happening in same era when Malefic One returned to multiverse."

"Yes... we already spoke of this prior, and two of us believe that Blood Legacy's appearance is evidence of system's intent to help vampire race," Iskar added. *"Everything simply points to that being case."*

Karine nodded slowly. "I agree. For system to effectively create a new source of vampires like this also indicates that it can do so again in future, even if all or vampires were wiped out."

Sword Saint nodded along, also agreeing with that assessment. "Considering Records that bled into our universe even before integration, vampires are far from forgotten by system."

"I have heard reports that re was knowledge of our kind already among many newly integrated," Karine muttered. After a few seconds, she turned away from Blood Legacy and toward Sword Saint.

"You came here with hopes of creating a bond between vampire families and your clan, correct? Allow me to make clear now you have succeeded in that," she said, looking over to Fairleigh. "Have a delegation ready for when new universe begins to open up. I will also discuss with or True Ancestors to make sure ones going can place a teleportation circle, allowing those of your clan to visit us here at Order, too."

"Thank you," Sword Saint nodded.

"As for Blood Legacy, while it's an invaluable artifact, I believe you have it for a reason," she sighed. "If we kept it here, while we could use it to create more vampires, it's likely for best to allow it to influence new universe. Bring some truly new blood into fold."

"I agree it best to keep it with Sword Saint," Iskar also agreed, slightly surprising Miyamoto.

Karine nodded. "That said, I do have one concern... you carry Sanguine's Blood Legacy, is Patriarch of a clan which now has many vampires within it, and I sense no hostility toward our kind. Which begs question: why are you not one of us?"

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Chapter 1085: A Quality Week

Sword Saint would be lying if he said he hadn't expected that question to come at some point. He also understood why, from his point of view, it was odd for him to carry around an ancient vampire artifact without turning into a vampire himself. However, no matter what people thought, he had his reasons.

One's quite frankly weren't privy to.

"Vampirism... isn't part of my Path," he merely said with a sigh, hoping discussion would end there, even if he knew that wasn't going to happen.

"Perhaps not right now, but one's Path is nothing if not adaptable," Karine argued. "I did a bit of research on you, and from my understanding, you are a man who pursues sword with great fervor, yet you also have a profession. Painting. While I understand you might find such a pastime relaxing or perhaps even soothing for soul, it doesn't quite seem to fit with your Path from my perspective."

Sword Saint remained quiet as True Ancestor continued. He knew he wouldn't hear anything he hadn't already considered himself, but out of politeness, he at least allowed her to try.

"Meanwhile, should you become a vampire, you could shed that profession and pursue sword far more single-mindedly. What's more, considering who you are and that you own Blood Legacy, I'm confident you will evolve into a powerful variant. Affinities of water and time that you cultivate currently are also easily transferable, as time is a common affinity controlled by vampires already, and with your powerful water affinity, you can combine it with blood and create something even greater. Overall, I believe you would become a lot more powerful as a vampire with your endurance in combat, especially shooting through roof with your resources combined. I see very few downsides to embracing vampirism at your current stage."

"What would those downsides be?" Sword Saint asked.

Karine, likely believing she had a chance to convince him, continued speaking.

"Vampires are, as you know, not a popular race in multiverse. That will naturally create some challenges. I will also admit that your Path will be more locked than before. You will need to cultivate some parts unique to your vampire race, but those will more likely than not happen in concert with sharpening your blade against powerful foes.

Admittedly, I also do not know how your current Patron will react, seeing as I cannot recall Primordial of Time ever blessing vampires before. n again, he rarely blesses anyone. Lastly, as a vampire, you will need to feed, but I'm certain you would be able to have that sorted working with skilled alchemists."

"Feeding would not be a problem," Iskar chimed in after Karine was done talking. "Remnants of Sanguine's power reside within this Blood Legacy, allowing owner to passively restore blood energy without need for feeding. Sadly, it only works for mortals, though."

"Vampire gods don't need to feed anymore, though it does remain beneficial to us. Just not a requirement," Karine explained something that both Iskar and Sword Saint hadn't known. "This means that if what Iskar said is true, you will be able to be a vampire without perhaps biggest downside."

"I see," Sword Saint nodded before sighing. "And yet answer remains no... for it still does not suit my Path."

"As I said, Paths are adaptable," Karine reiterated, trying to remain convincing. "I understand that you may be stubborn and believe that-"

"True Ancestor... answer remains no and will always be no," Sword Saint said, leaving no room for discussion. However, for good measure, he did momentarily flare his aura as a Transcendent. Fairleigh and True Ancestor both weren't Transcendents and thus couldn't passively sense he had one, but at least Miyamoto had learned to purposefully display his status when he so desired.

Karine didn't seem overly surprised at his aura, likely having already known he was a Transcendent beforehand. Again, anyone with a Transcendent could feel he had one, and at Nevermore, re had naturally been ors around, including people from major factions who were pretty much just re to identify ors with Transcendents.

She also seemed to instantly understand why he rejected her advice and simply nodded. "Very well, decision is ultimately yours."

"Thank you," Sword Saint bowed. Primarily because he knew he had been a little rude for interrupting her earlier. Not that vampire god seemed offended in slightest.

"I perhaps overstepped," True Ancestor acknowledged her mistake. Meanwhile, Fairleigh was merely looking at m while clearly trying to handle pressure from being in presence of a powerful god. He wasn't looking that good. Contrarily, Sword Saint had already adapted to her aura, and while he could certainly still feel her presence, it was quite manageable.

“With that matter settled... I am curious to learn more about history of vampires. parts most people don't know, as I'm sure several factions have done much to suppress or erase your history,” Sword Saint said.

Truthfully, he wasn't that interested, but he knew vampires liked to speak of ir history, and he didn't lie when he said he held some level of curiosity. Plus, more he knew, better he could avoid making any mistakes while dealing with high-level vampires in future. It was something he had a feeling he would end up doing quite a lot, considering his plans to forge a good relationship between six families and Noboru clan.

Karine smiled. “It would be my pleasure to enlighten you. Fairleigh, go get us some refreshments.”

“Yes, True Ancestor,” man bowed as he hurried out of room.

“That was kind of you,” Sword Saint said, easily seeing through why she had sent him away. He didn't doubt she had plenty of such refreshments on her already, so for her to send him out was clearly just a nice way to give him a break.

“Usually, mortals don't do well around gods for too long, though you do appear to be an exception to that rule. Courtesy of Chosen of Malefic Viper, I assume,” she said with a smile.

“Jake does have that kind of effect on people,” Miyamoto nodded with a smile, deliberately using Jake's first name to communicate ir closeness.

“In exchange for me telling you some of our secrets, perhaps you could share stories about your adventures with Chosen?” Karine asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I would gladly divulge some embarrassing anecdotes,” Sword Saint joked as he and True Ancestor began first real meeting between Noboru clan and vampires from six families.

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“And you're sure you don't want to come in?” Irin asked, turning to look at Jake.

“Nah, I'm good,” he shrugged. “You just go ahead and do your thing... a bit quicker this time if possible.”

“Alright, alright,” Irin shrugged as she went into fifth clothing store in a row, with Jake not even boring to enter this one. He still didn't understand why Irin kept buying clos that didn't even provide any stats, and none of her explanations made sense eir, so he'd just chosen to accept it. He could understand that she wanted a few sets, but at this point, she had to at least have bought a dozen. Latest content published on **novel★fire★net**

It had been a few days since he returned to Order, and during this period, he'd naturally spent some quality time with Irin – solely to help her level up and stuff, of course – and even done a bit of meditation reading here and re.

Today, y'd gone out to do a bit of shopping as Jake wanted to buy some alchemical ingredients. What kind of ingredients? Well, he wasn't entirely sure yet, which was why he decided to go shopping so he could see what was available. plan was kind of just to look through a lot of more popular stores before something would hopefully catch his eye. In or words, it was a planned shopping trip to make spontaneous purchases.

While y had certainly looked through a few alchemy stores already, and Jake had even bought a few things, he was beginning to reconsider wher having Irin along was a good idea. Was she good at knowing all best shops, and did her guidance save him a lot of time he would have orwise spent aimlessly wandering around? Yes. But a lot of that saved time was instead spent on clothing stores.

To make matters worse—or maybe better, Jake wasn't sure yet—she'd even bought some clothing for him to wear. kind Jake would never usually wear, as he preferred his armor, which he had been told was kind of weird. People usually wore different clothing when not going to battle, and only mages or casters were known to just wear ir usual equipment at all times.

Jake could understand why many warriors preferred more casual clos during ir everyday lives, as lying on a couch in full plate armor didn't sound very relaxing. Meanwhile, people with medium armor, such as Jake, sometimes walked around in ir full getup despite not having any plans to fight, even if it was still viewed as very weird to wear it when chilling at home.

One small point of clarification was that, despite not technically wearing one's armor, one would still get stats provided. According to system, any bound armor to a person was always worn, which was also why it was so easy to change in and out of in an instant and why, despite it being nearly entirely destroyed, as long as it wasn't fully gone, one would keep all stats. It was powered by glory of system-fuckery to extreme.

All of this is to say that Jake had no real excuse to keep walking around with armor on while at home. Was he still going to walk around with armor on most times anyway? Probably... but now he at least had some stuff to change into if he wanted to.

Jake wasn't really that annoyed at Irin, as he was at least partially to blame. He had been one to talk about his visit with his parents and let slip that he walked around in full battle getup even back n, only wearing "casual" clos a few times here and re. When she'd asked him why, Jake had made excuse he didn't have anything else to wear, which was a big reason why he had ended up in his current predicament.

Anyway, Irin was soon done shopping as y went to see a few more alchemy stores before it was time to head home again. Jake had considered wher he also wanted some

new equipment, but had ended up deciding not to. He knew Arnold was still working on more stuff for him, and with newly gained ring that granted a fuckload of stats, he wasn't really feeling effects of not being fully capped on stats he could get from equipment.

Finally, he wanted to see what Panon of Life had available. From what he'd gared, chances were he could get some nice equipment re, too, perhaps even some that was better than what Order had to offer. Order wasn't exactly known as crafters of medium armor, which Jake preferred to wear, while Panon of Life had a lot of hunters and fighters wearing equipment similar to his, naturally resulting in m also having a lot of lear workers and bowyers.

After spending anor few hours shopping, Jake and Irin headed back to Jake's residence. Jake had stocked up on a lot of alchemical reagents, and he had more coming in form of large bulk orders he'd placed directly with one of higher-ups of Order, gladly abusing his status as Chosen of entire organization. All of this is to say, Jake should have plenty to tide him over for a long time.

Back at residence, Jake was just reminded of something as y appeared from gate in entryway. "Say, did you find out about Scarlett, by way?"

Seeing as he was at Order, Jake had wanted to meet up with albino snake to see how she was doing, but it turned out she wasn't around. He had considered asking Villy if he knew where she was, but had just asked Irin instead. She was a bit weird in sense that she *really* liked it when Jake asked her to do things for him, so he sometimes asked her for favors for no good reason. In this case, asking about Scarlett was fully within boundaries of her job description, making it not weird at all while also clearly making her happy.

"Let me just check," Irin said as she took out her token and scanned it for a moment. "Ah, yes, it says here she's currently away on a dungeon expedition with a group consisting of members from different Dragonflights. Should have guessed that one."

That was also when Jake remembered that fateful dinner party that had ended with that guy from Azure Flight losing an arm to Villy roleplaying a waiter. After such an ordeal, Jake halfway expected Dragonflights to be wary of Scarlett, but it appeared it was just opposite, which struck him as odd.

"Why should you have guessed that?" Jake asked. "Have Dragonflights been spending a lot of time with her recently?"

"That would be an understatement," Irin chuckled while shaking her head. "After you officially revealed yourself as Chosen of Malefic Viper, many factions have tried to form relations with people you're considered close to. Even Reika and her roommate Bastilla have had quite some attention on m as it's well-known you went to a dungeon with m."

"I see," Jake mumbled. "I take it you've also been bored a lot?"

"Oh, of course, but I see it only as beneficial," succubus shrugged. "I'm riding high on all that attention. Anyway, different factions chose to target different people. Altmar are naturally trying to get close to Lady Dawnleaf, though in her case, it's also in large part due to her position as Duskleaf's Chosen. As for Scarlett, Dragonflights chose her as their target."

"Should I be worried?" Jake asked with some concern.

"I wouldn't be," Irin shook her head. "We are all fully aware of what's happening and are all just taking advantage. Plus, even if members of these factions have been told to try and get closer to us, that doesn't mean genuine connections can't be made. Everyone involved knows what's happening, so no need to be concerned."

"Alright, I guess," Jake sighed. He still didn't like the notion that those around him always had to consider if people got close to him genuinely or just as a way to get to Jake. Maybe he was just projecting, as Jake didn't like it himself that a lot wanted to get close to him simply because he was Chosen of Malefic Viper.

At least a lot of factions wanted to get to know him now because of his Nevermore performance and his Primeval Origins abilities. He found that a way more acceptable reason, as that was at least his own power and not just something gained from pure association.

Speaking of taking advantage of someone else's status, Sylphie also wasn't around as she was doing something Jake hadn't expected she'd ever want to... she was taking a few lessons. That's right, small hawk had willingly asked Jake to go through lessons available and selected some that she was interested in.

Maybe she was just bored or wanted out of residence, as Jake and Irin had made liberal use of mansion's privacy feature, but result was still good. From what she'd said, lessons she attended were mostly related to techniques and methods to more efficiently digest natural treasures, so it definitely sounded like she was spending her time well.

Speaking of spending time well... Jake soon came to learn that Irin had also bought a few outfits for herself that were not exactly suitable for everyday use – even by succubus standards - and she was very interested in Jake's opinion of them.

There was even a standing offer that if he wasn't a fan, he was free to remove them at any time.

Like so, several days at Order quickly passed, and soon, Jake and Irin had spent a quality week at Order. They had all done what they needed, and soon, it was time for them to leave once more as Panon of Life awaited.

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Chapter 1086: Old Man Vibes

“Are y valuable?” Jake asked as he looked at three bottles on table. He’d already tried to use Identify on m to no avail, but considering ir source, y had to be valuable. It wasn’t easy to tell, though, as he didn’t even get a response when he used skill despite knowing y were obviously items. For all he knew, all three could be filled with water.

“I would say so,” Villy nodded. “At least I’m fairly confident that around half gods in multiverse would gladly kill you to obtain two of m, despite risks of doing so.”

“That does sound valuable... or I’m just severely overestimating how risky it would actually be for some random god to pop in and snuff me out,” Jake muttered.

“Eh, I would definitely kill m in return. Probably erase ir entire lineages, too. You know, just for good measure. Would make me look weak if I didn’t go a bit overboard with response,” Viper shrugged.

“So definitely valuable,” Jake nodded. He also knew that reason Identify didn’t work was because Malefic Viper had blocked skill. Again, Jake couldn’t even detect y were special with his Bloodline-empowered Perception, but he was fairly confident bottles were far from usual ones Jake used. y had to be enchanted with some pretty serious magic.

“Hey, I can’t look like a cheapskate,” Villy shrugged. “This will be your first time officially visiting anor major faction as my Chosen. It’s a pretty big deal in grand scheme of things, and it’s only expected that some proper gifts are brought. Plus, more I give m, more Nature’s Attendant and Yggdrasil are able to give you in return without it seeming improper.”

“That sounds like more political bullshit,” Jake sighed.

“Not really. It’s more about not owing one anor. If I make you go re empty-handed and y help you out with something, it’ll be expected that I’ll also help ir next official visitor in kind. Meanwhile, if I have you bring nice stuff and y do nice things for you, we’re square,” Malefic Viper explained. “It’s really not that complicated.”

“Still sounds dumb. What happened to helping friends just out of kindness of your heart?” Jake said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Everything in multiverse is transactional to some extent," Viper said casually. "If you decided that you were happy with being a C-grade for rest of your life and retired to spend your remaining days with your parents, I would definitely have you killed as having that kind of person as my Chosen would just be too damn embarrassing."

"Now that's a bit hurtful," Jake very accurately pointed out.

"It's just a silly oretical," snake god said, shaking his head. "I don't think it would be physically or psychologically possible for you to settle down for good. It goes against your base nature. But I am fully serious. I would likewise expect you to abandon me if I proved myself too weak and unworthy of being your Patron. Believe it or not, it happens a lot more than you think. Powerful mortals with low-tier gods as ir Patrons grow into mselves and begin to stand out in multiverse, only for a top-tier god to swoop in and offer mortal a position as ir Chosen instead. Something mortals very rarely reject."

"That somehow sounds incredibly messy," Jake frowned. "I would expect some rapport to be established between mortal and god to not make m abandon ir Patron so easily."

"Oh, don't misunderstand. To a low-tier god, having someone like a Primordial steal ir Chosen is an incredible honor. What's more, this thievery often happens within same Panons, so re really isn't any kind of betrayal going on anywhere. Instead, it's more thought of as mortal getting promoted to a higher-ranked department," Villy explained.

"That's also why it was such a big deal when you acted as if you were going to abandon me in favor of Valdemar. only way for that to happen was if both you and Valdemar viewed it as a large step up, going from my Chosen to his. Usually, one only does large jumps when "upgrading" Patrons. No one would ever go from Nature's Attendant to Yggdrasil under any kind of usual circumstances. So you denouncing my Blessing was same as communicating to everyone I was even more washed up than orwise assumed."

"Man, good to know all that after fact," Jake joked. "I'll try not to get tempted by or gods."

"You better," Villy said with a mischievous smile. "I did hear a certain wood elf offered you position as her Chosen not too long ago, so maybe I should be a little worried. She can offer perks I'm not confident in competing with."

"Ha, ha, very funny," Jake answered with a deadpan expression as he switched topic. "Can I just take those bottles as is? No need to put m in something to better protect m or anything?"

"Jake, if you were capable of even putting a scratch on any of se bottles, I would advise you to go hunt down a few S-grades instead, as I'd have clearly underestimated your offensive prowess," snake god said teasingly. "Also, y are all enchanted to only be

usable by its recipients. On that note, one of them is for Nature's Attendant, and one is for Yggdrasil."

"How about that last one?" Jake asked, also noting that Viper had said earlier that only two of them were extremely valuable. He assumed those two were ones for two pinnacle gods.

"Come on, you really need me to outright tell you?" Villy was fully back to teasing him. "Little hint... it's more from you than me; it's not for Dina but for female member of Panon of Life you spent a lot of time with during your Nevermore visit, and I believe she wields a bow, while-"

"I got it from first part," Jake interrupted Viper.

"Hey, don't blame me; you're notoriously dense," Villy grinned, having way more fun than he should have.

Jake shook his head as he swiped three bottles and put them away. Once they were in his possession, Jake could also somehow tell who each of them was meant to be given to. He wanted to question what kind of magic Viper had placed on them to create such an effect, but honestly, he knew the answer wouldn't do him any good, as it was definitely magic way beyond his abilities.

Anyhow, today was day Jake, Sword Saint, and Sylphie would all head to Panon of Life. Irin had already left Jake's residence to have a meeting with her S-grade master – a fellow succubus named Velvet Mistress – while Sylphie was still at her final lesson before it was time to go.

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On that note, there technically wasn't anything going on that day, but the teacher in question had noticed Sylphie in one of her lessons and offered to provide some one-on-one guidance. Hearing this, Jake naturally looked into who this teacher was and saw she was an A-grade avian monster woman who wasn't part of any major factions besides being a guest at Order of Malefic Viper. From what Jake gathered, it wasn't hard to figure out she wanted to try and form a positive relationship with Sylphie, knowing she was close to Jake and blessed by Stormild. And honestly? Good for Sylphie. Jake was all for her using her status to get some benefits. It would be very hypocritical for Jake to think otherwise.

"Is old man still at vampire place?" Jake asked snake god. He knew Sylphie would be back in his residence pretty soon, but he hadn't been in contact with Sword Saint since they split up after arriving at Order.

"He is," Villy nodded before adding: "You know, I did consider asking you why you call him an old man, considering he's still pretty damn young, but I somehow can't disagree with your statement that he seems like an old man."

"Right?" Jake said with a smile. "Being an old man is totally a mindset. Vibe someone gives off."

"Or, in some instances, y are just really old for ir grade and close to death," Viper pointed out.

"At which point y have vibe of an old person," Jake perfectly countered.

"You know what, I'm just gonna agree with you on that one," Villy smiled as he leaned forward. "Eir way, you should go fetch him."

"Right," Jake nodded before frowning. "Damn, Irin left way too early; I reckon she could have quickly figured out exactly whe--"

"No need," Viper interrupted Jake. "I got ya."

"What do y--"

--

Jake's vision flashed as suddenly he found himself somewhere else. Instantly upon appearing, he oriented himself, and quite honestly, he wasn't sure what to think about what he saw and felt.

first thing he noticed was aura of a powerful god. He estimated it to be at or around Godqueen level, which meant it was a pretty powerful one. next thing he noticed was aura of Sword Saint, who was also re. Now, who was present wasn't what threw Jake off.

It was what y were doing.

Jake found himself staring as he saw a woman lying posed on a couch wearing what he could only describe as lingerie. Looking at her was Sword Saint, who was standing with an easel between two of m, holding a brush with a mostly finished and quite realistic painting in front of him.

Needless to say, Jake took a moment to really understand what he was seeing, and he just knew that Viper was cackling maniacally back in his residence. only thing that made Jake feel slightly better was that he wasn't only startled one.

woman on couch was about to move upon noticing him as Sword Saint raised a hand. "Remain still."

To Jake's surprise, she listened and didn't move her body. She did speak, tho.

"I greet Chosen of Malefic One... and I apologize that I'm currently in an indisposed state," she said, only thing moving her mouth.

"Eh, no worries," Jake scratched back of his head as he tried not to be impolite by staring too much. He did faintly feel as if he recognized woman, though, and when he scoured his memories, he suddenly remembered.

Back in Treasure Hunt, he'd swiped a few paintings of a more... risque nature. He recognized her from some of those paintings, which also made him realize she had to be a really old vampire god. Not that she looked old, at least not compared to Sword Saint. She didn't have that old-person vibe at all.

"Seeing as I did not notice who teleported you in here, I assume it was Malefic One?" vampire asked him.

"It was indeed," Jake nodded.

"I see. I take it you are here to have Miyamoto follow you to Panon of Life? If that is so, I do not wish to delay your journey, so we can stop here and perhaps take it up another time," she spoke.

"No need; we can leave when I'm done," Sword Saint said, with Jake quickly backing him up.

"Yeah, we're waiting for Sylphie anyway; she's still participating in a lesson," Jake explained. Also, he noticed how vampire goddess used Sword Saint's name, which really didn't say much, considering she was already having him paint her in a rather exposed position.

"Very well, n," vampire goddess said, sounding a bit relieved.

"I'll, eh, just meditate until you're done," Jake said as he quickly sat down right where he was and closed his eyes. He'd originally considered offering to leave, but room he was in didn't have any doors, and a quick pulse told him y were at least a few hundred kilometers beneath ground, within a mountain, or some shit like that. At least re was just solid rock all around him as far as he could see.

Entering meditation, Jake didn't even bother trying to read First Sage's tome. First of all, he wasn't really in mindset, and while that could be fixed pretty quickly through Jake's ability to hyperfocus on stuff, second reason he didn't bother was exactly due to this hyperfocus. Based on progress of Sword Saint's painting, he should be done pretty soon, and it would suck for Jake to get engrossed only for him to be kicked awake.

So, instead of reading, Jake just did some or stuff, which could be boiled down to just playing around with his increased control of his own Soulspace. Not getting overly engrossed in anything turned out to be a good idea, as not even an hour later, Jake saw Sword Saint put down brush through his sphere.

Jake considered opening his eyes right n and re, but feared that would make it look as though he'd only been acting as if he was meditating. Luckily, Sword Saint knew about Jake's ability to use his Bloodline to remain aware of his surroundings while meditating, making old man quickly summon a drop of water he shot at Jake's forehead. The link to origin of this information rests in novel✕

Taking advantage of that move, Jake moved his hand up to block drop with a finger right before he opened his eyes. Being woken up by an incoming "attack" was way less suspicious than just waking up by himself.

"You're done?" Jake asked. By time he'd opened his eyes, vampire goddess was already sitting upright, now fully covered in a dress that didn't show any skin besides her face and hands.

"I'm done," Sword Saint nodded. vampire got up and went around easel to see finished painting. When she saw it, she smiled and nodded.

"I do understand why you refuse to part with your profession, and perhaps I underestimated your talents in craft," she said.

"sharpest sword requires not just raw power but delicacy and grace," Sword Saint said in a dignified tone. "Not that I dare take much credit for this creation. Even a layman could depict beauty on canvas when all he needs to do is capture but an iota of subject's."

"Such a charmer," vampire goddess smiled. She waved her hand as painting disappeared, and a gateway appeared on one of walls. "You can use that to return to your residence, Chosen of Malefic One. I would love to greet you more appropriately, but seeing as I've already delayed you two enough, let us have our official first meeting anor time."

Jake just nodded as vampire turned to Sword Saint. "Oh, and Miyamoto... do come visit again."

two of m had already begun moving toward gateway as Sword Saint turned and smiled at her. "I would be glad to, Lady Karine."

With those words, Jake and old man went through gateway and returned to Jake's residence, and at that moment, Jake had to admit that old man really didn't give off any old man vibes during that little encounter.

Back at residence, after confirming Viper had also left, Jake couldn't help but turn to Sword Saint.

"Did you...?"

old man merely shook his head. "No matter answer, it's none of your business."

"I guess it's not..." Jake muttered, once more genuinely taken aback by Sword Saint's power in that particular area. Considering he was soon meeting Artemis again...

"Got any... eh... tips?" Jake asked, a bit embarrassed.

"None that I believe would work for you," old man shook his head, shooting down that topic.

Jake just nodded and sighed. Luckily, not enough time passed for things to turn awkward before ir final travel mate arrived. Sylphie popped in through gateway only about a minute later, excited to see two of m already re and waiting.

With all of m gared Jake led m toward gateway, taking m to where rest of group who would head to Panon of Life were waiting. Three C-grades couldn't exactly travel multiverse alone but would be escorted re by far more powerful individuals. Likely gods.

Who knows, perhaps re would even be a familiar face among m.

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Chapter 1087 - "...Do we really need to bring that guy?"

Order of Malefic Viper hadn't been most diplomatic organization for a very long time. It mainly stuck to itself and had or factions come to it as its only method of communicating with ors. No matter how much Order declined, Academy of Malefic Viper remained a top-tier institution of multiverse due to Malefic Viper's Legacy, maintaining many of Order's relations through high-level individuals who had been students re.

Now that Order was done being a passive faction of multiverse, it was also time to start being more diplomatic. It had already sent out a few ambassadors and diplomats to some of its closest allies, but re was no doubt upcoming visit to Panon of Life would be most prominent official diplomatic mission in many eras. Chosen of Malefic Viper, as well as several high-tier individuals and even gods, would go, making it quite ordeal.

While a Chosen visiting was already a big deal in itself, the fact that this was Jake in particular made it even more momentous. Not only was it his first time officially visiting Panon faction as a Chosen, but he was also a quite notorious figure in his own right.

Jake certainly didn't fit the regular mold of a Chosen. Not only had he been involved with war against Yip of Yore in quite a prominent role, but he was also the top scorer on all-time Nevermore Leaderboards and known as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins. All of this coming together made him and this visit quite a big deal, as even if he wasn't a Chosen, he would have been received as an honored guest.

That's also why Jake wasn't surprised by how many had shown up when he, Sylphie, and Sword Saint went through a gateway leading to the large courtyard where those who would be visiting Panon of Life had gathered.

Around two hundred people would be going this time around, and that didn't even count the gods. Right as Jake and his friends entered the courtyard, all attention was instantly on them as the nearest people – a group of B- and A-grade dragonkin – lowered their heads.

"We greet the Chosen of the Malefic One," the first group spoke, their words making them aware that Jake and company had arrived, making them act in kind as Jake spent the next half a minute just having people greet him. While it was a bit annoying, it did allow Jake to scan what kind of people would go.

Jake estimated that about a hundred of the people present were alchemists. They made it kind of easy to figure that out, considering they were all wearing similar robes identifying them as members of the Academy of the Malefic Viper.

The rest of them were obviously diplomats, with a few fighters mixed in here and there, but it was quite evident that most people didn't expect to visit the hunting grounds controlled by Panon of Life.

When it came to the power of the people present, it quickly became evident that only C-grades were Jake, Sword Saint, and Sylphie. The majority were B-grade, with a few dozen A-grades and just over a dozen S-grades. All in all, it was quite a showing, with Jake naturally being the main guest.

At least among mortals... because the gods had yet to make their appearance. Jake guessed they had waited for Jake to arrive, as shortly after he was there, the aura of a god descended upon the courtyard. All of the mortals, except for the C-grades and most of the S-grades, instantly fell to their knees as a god manifested floating above them all.

It was a woman Jake didn't recognize, but she clearly knew who he was as she made sure to make eye contact with him and nod in greeting before she spoke.

"Greetings, everyone. I'm Linea, a relatively new member of the Order, and I've been tasked with organizing this expedition to Panon of Life," she spoke. "I want to first of all

clarify that I'm merely organizer. true leader of this expedition shall be Chosen of Malefic One..."

She motioned down to Jake, who nodded in acknowledgment.

"... as well as Grand Elder of Academy of Malefic Viper and disciple of Malefic One himself, Duskleaf," she continued, Jake unable to hold back his surprise. Google search **novel**•fire•net

Duskleaf is actually leaving Order? He asked himself, thinking for a moment he had heard wrong. Based on what Jake knew, alchemist never went anywhere. He was definition of a shut-in, so if he was really going... yeah, this expedition was definitely a big deal.

"Grand Elder shall naturally follow us without revealing himself, something I'm sure quite a few of you mortals would appreciate," god called Linea said with a smile.

A few uncomfortable chuckles could be heard as Jake was once more reminded how mortals tended to kind of just keel over when in presence of a powerful god. god called Linea wasn't that bad, and Jake estimated her to be just shy of a high-tier god, which, while powerful, wasn't completely overwhelming to some of stronger S-grades.

Jake did kind of question Duskleaf being hidden, though. His personal guess was that alchemist just didn't want to show himself because doing so would be a bor. As for why he wanted to go to Panon of Life in first place... well, re could be a myriad of reasons why an alchemist wished to visit domain of a literal plant Primordial.

On topic of how powerful Duskleaf actually was, Jake had to admit that Grand Elder kind of felt weaker than god floating in front of him. Yet, at same time, Duskleaf also gave Jake a feeling that re was more to him. Considering Viper's stance on progress and constantly getting stronger, Jake had to assume that Duskleaf was more powerful than he let on, seeing as Viper still respected him and acknowledged him as his disciple.

"As for who shall escort you, I shall naturally be present, along with seven or deities, including Grand Elder. We don't expect anything to happen, and journey shouldn't take very long, but better safe than sorry," Linea continued, explaining.

From looks on everyone's faces, Jake had a strong feeling this entire speech was more for him and two he was with than anyone else. Everyone else was positively ancient compared to three of m, and y had definitely been through stuff like this before. goddess was just being nice and explaining this to everyone thoroughly so as not to make Jake feel dumb for asking questions.

"Now, are re any questions, or is everyone ready to leave?" Linea asked as she scoured room, naturally placing most attention on Jake and company.

Which turned out to be a good idea... because Jake did have one burning question in his mind. One born from him, having detected all gods hidden in surroundings after y arrived a few seconds ago, with one of m definitely having gotten close enough entirely on purpose to make sure Jake noticed him.

Raising his hand, Jake spoke. "Just one... do we really need to bring that guy?"

Jake asked as he pointed to a spot in empty air not far from Linea. Everyone followed his finger, but didn't see anything. Jake guessed only Linea knew what Jake was referring to, but before she even had a chance to answer, guy in question spoke up.

"Hey! That's, like, super rude. I'm here as a special contractor, having taken on a job I would normally never even consider!" figure spoke as he revealed himself, looking quite annoyed and entirely ignoring that doing so would unleash his aura, smashing remaining S-grades down on ir knees as his presence washed over m.

A presence that didn't simply reach Godking level but slightly surpassed it. It was not at level of Lord Protector... but it was close.

"I wasn't one who hired you," Jake shook his head. "And I get feeling we're in more danger with you around than without you."

"Okay, you're just getting ruder by sentence," god said, crossing his arms and staring down at Jake with all four eyes. "I'll definitely demand a bonus on account of long-term consequences to my mental health. Hazard pay does not cover this kind of treatment."

"Getting any pay at all definitely means you outright scammed whoever hired you," Jake said, shaking his head. He was only halfway joking... he didn't seriously believe y would need that much protection. If y did, Viper would have come himself. No, nine gods were definitely overkill for-

Wait... nine? Didn't she say re were eight in total?

"I... this one greets All-God Legion," Linea bowed, Jake only realizing now what was going on. She didn't know he was re... because he wasn't meant to be re.

"Seriously?" Jake asked as he looked at Minaga. "You really snuck in here? That's downright shameless."

"I already told you I was hired on a special contract to-"

"Who hired you?"

"That's entirely confidential, and I would never-"

"You hired yourself, didn't you?" Jake sighed.

“What? No! Admittedly, guy who hired me did look a lot like me, but we were definitely different clones... I mean people. Yep, definitely meant different but equally handsome people,” Minaga said, nodding confidently as everyone observing now knew exactly what was going on.

One thing that did surprise Jake a bit was that pretty much no one seemed surprised at seeing such a powerful god acting like that. Sure, there was some level of surprise, but not as much as there would be if it were some other god. Again... assuming most of those present had gone to Nevermore, this likely wasn't their first encounter with Minaga.

“If All-God Legion wishes to join us, I don't believe that would cause any issues,” Linea spoke, having regained her bearings.

She had likely also concluded that mere fact that Minaga was allowed to be present meant Malefic Viper approved of it. There was no way Minaga could have snuck in without Primordial knowing, so Jake also concluded that either Villy had known or he didn't care.

As for why Minaga wanted to join their little expedition in the first place... Jake genuinely had no idea. Someone like Minaga could easily visit on his own without raising any issues. He was one of few truly neutral gods of the multiverse, his only real affiliation with Nevermore. For him to suddenly arrive with an entourage from Order of Malefic Viper had to be seen as weird, right?

Not that Jake ultimately cared. If Minaga wanted to come, only one capable of stopping him was Villy, and snake god clearly wasn't going to do that, so it appeared they would be stuck with Unique Lifeform.

“Well, I would most certainly like to join,” Minaga said triumphantly. “Now, I do recognize that my presence is a bit unsettling to borderline everyone here, but fear not, I have a solution!”

Waving his hand, Minaga opened a small portal as he walked out. Minaga. Newly arrived Minaga turned and spoke to the first one. “Hello, I would like to apply for a job of traveling alongside Order of Malefic Viper to visit Panon of Life.”

“You're hired, starting immediately!” the first Minaga said with a smile. “With that settled, if anyone has any questions, please don't bother my newly hired proxy here. We're quite similar in temper and would both be equally annoyed if bored too much.”

With that, god-tier Minaga disappeared, and newly arrived one teleported down to Jake and company, emanating an aura of an S-grade.

“Pleased to meet you, I'm Minaga, and I look forward to working with you!” Unique Lifeform said with a big smile as he reached out to shake Jake's hand.

"You never get tired of that bit, huh?" Jake asked as he nevertheless reached out and shook Minaga's hand.

"It's been funny for dozens of eras, and it's still absolutely hilarious," Minaga said without any shame.

Jake didn't even think it was worth arguing as he turned to Linea. "I think it's about time we head off."

"As Chosen commands," goddess nodded. "Everyone, gather in middle of courtyard, and I shall bring us to grand teleportation circle."

They all did as asked, and once they were all gathered, goddess activated her magic. Jake felt himself be teleported only for him to reappear, standing on an absolutely massive platform deep below ground in an even more enormous cavern.

Jake barely had time to get a good look around before they teleported once more. This teleport was a bit different, though. Jake faintly detected concept of void along with teleportation, and while they didn't enter void, they definitely skirted very close to it.

This teleport also took several seconds, seeing as they teleported an incredibly vast distance. Their target location was just outside main territory controlled by Yggdrasil, as a giant anti-teleportation formation covered several galaxy clusters, not allowing him to head straight to Primordial's inner domain.

To be clear, plan was never to head to inner domain right away. They would instead fly through cosmos, allowing several of most powerful people within Panon of Life to see him on way. This was mainly aimed at many guests and visitors of Primordial faction to really show off that Order was coming for an official visit.

As expected, they soon arrived at their destination on a small planet expressly set up to receive guests of Panon of Life. There, Order already had their mode of transportation prepared as Jake and everyone else boarded a massive ship that seemed to be made out of metal he didn't recognize. Considering markings on side of boat, it clearly belonged to Order of Malefic Viper, especially seeing as it even had a crew ready and waiting.

Jake couldn't help himself as he scanned ship from top to bottom. Entire thing was about half a kilometer in length and a hundred meters wide, with a height of around sixty meters. It wasn't massive, not even by old-world standards. In some ways, it even reminded him of an enormous aircraft carrier, except it didn't have runways or anything like that, but instead a few weapons topside along with a large bridge or command deck on one end.

Its insides were mostly just living space, though there were also several technical areas. One thing that also surprised Jake was that nowhere was spatially expanded in any way

whatsoever. Jake could see everything from top to bottom without any interference. That wasn't to say ship didn't have any defensive barriers because, hot damn, it had a lot going on that was way above Jake's level.

"Welcome aboard, everyone," Linea said once y were all re and had boarded ship. "This vessel shall be our home until we arrive at center of Panon of Life. For those who are wondering, ship is of Altmar design with staff trained by Altmar Empire to properly operate it. It's officially a god-tier vessel, and while an S-grade is capable of powering it, it works best when a god is at helm. Navigating and powering vessel will be my job during this time, so I may not be contactable. However, your only job – outside of diplomats who already know ir assignments - is to relax and maybe get a bit of alchemy done. Laboratories have already been prepared."

Jake and everyone else were listening, and from how Sylphie and Sword Saint looked around, y were impressed with ship. Jake also looked forward to exploring it, as while thing wasn't big, it still had pretty spacious living quarters with private laboratories.

"Each of you will also be given a token that can be used to contact staff and make use of different facilities aboard. This token will also function as your room keys to your quarters, all of which have already been assigned."

Linea waved her hand as tokens appeared floating in front of m all. Jake reached out and took his right away, but just n, a figure appeared behind him again. sole person present who hadn't been given a token... because he wasn't even meant to be re.

"So, here we are. Two buddies. Hey, seeing as I don't have an assigned room, wanna be bunkmates?" Minaga asked as he grinned. "Come on, it's gonna be so much fun! We can tell scary stories into night, orize dungeon design, try to do a bit of bug fixing, oh, and I can tell you about this new kind of trap room I'm thinking about making. Imagine this: spikes shooting guns that shoot even more spikes! If I combine that with-

Jake began to subtly zone out Unique Lifeform as suddenly he felt this "short" journey would feel a lot longer than it actually was.

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Chapter 1088: A Voyage Through Stars

Jake stood on an observation deck above bridge of ship as he saw world pass by all around him. It was nothing but a constant stream of colors with nothing distinct ever visible, ir speed simply too high for him to distinguish anything.

He had remained interested in how spaceship worked, and he'd assumed it would work a bit like Sandy and its ability to enter subspace to circumvent some of regular laws of space. He had been correct... kind of.

Genuinely, he remained confused about how it all worked. spaceship y were on was shaped like a regular ship meant to sail on water, which, in retrospect, didn't make much sense if it was supposed to fly through space. However, when y started moving, he realized that design was like that for a reason.

bottom part of vessel was submerged in what to Jake looked like complete darkness. When he looked down and not straight ahead or up, all Jake could see was darkness everywhere he looked, as if y were sailing an endless black ocean. From rudimentary explanation he'd been given, what he saw when he looked down was barrier between void and reality.

A vessel such as this skirted this line. A part of ship was so deep in subspace that it was practically outside of reality, allowing it to travel forward at incredible speeds, all while top half remained in universe for all to see. Seeing as all regular laws of physics had long broken down, faster-than-light travel wasn't anything impressive in slightest. Jake had no idea how fast y were currently going, but it definitely wasn't slow.

Again, entire purpose of m traveling using a ship like this was to be seen. If y had truly wanted to get to Panon of Life as quickly as possible, y could have gotten re within an hour. All y would have had to do was teleport to small planet right outside Panon of Life's domain, passed through barrier that blocked external teleportation, and n eir had a god help teleport rest of way or just used Panon of Life's own internal teleportation network.

Seeing as simply arriving quickly at Panon of Life's heartlands wasn't its only objective, y had chosen this method of transportation.

Usually, this kind of ship was only used when exploring sections of space with no established factions. Even gods were limited where y could teleport to, as one of basic requirements was being able to see where y wanted to teleport to. All gods had ability to scry somewhere y'd been before, making it easy to teleport re, but when exploring vastness of space, its teleportation range was effectively range of its Perception or Perception-based abilities.

That's why a ship like this was more effective when venturing into unknown. It allowed even gods to travel at incredible speeds until something of note was spotted worth actually exploring. What's more, it was far more relaxing to chill on a ship than constantly be scrying and teleporting around – or worse – flying around yourself.

Jake had also been informed that current speed of vessel was far from its limit but that going too fast would make m harder to detect, resulting in most S-grades becoming

unable to recognize its passage. Something that would naturally be highly counterintuitive.

All in all, using a ship like this to travel through internal territory of a major faction was indeed out of ordinary, making Order of Malefic Viper attract even more attention with this move. This had evidently worked, as Jake felt powerful beings scanning vessel intermittently, and he did find it kind of comical how many of them rapidly disengaged their senses after detecting whose ship belonged to.

Along way to center of Panon of Life's territory, plan was also to drop off diplomats on a few select major planets or points of interest. It shouldn't come as a surprise, but territory ruled by Panon of Life was stupidly massive, which was why this journey took so long despite how fast they were going. Oh, and when they did encounter a lot of empty space, ship would teleport forward to not just sail through nothingness for a day or two.

Jake didn't really complain about length of journey at all. It was interesting seeing more of multiverse, even if it was only through glimpses of different places they stopped. Also, in total, trip should only take around two weeks, and they were already on day three.

Of course, there was still one pain point.

"Quite view, eh?" four-eyed Unique Lifeform spoke as he appeared behind Jake, who'd otherwise enjoyed standing on viewing deck all by himself, enjoying his alone time.

"It's unique," Jake spoke, knowing there was no excuse once newly arrived being decided he wanted to chat.

"If you learn how to fly really fast, it's actually pretty standard, though I guess with your low Perception, it does look impressive," Minaga nodded, acting all jovial despite having just said something incredibly offensive.

"Saying my Perception is low... those are fighting words," Jake said in a serious tone.

"Low in grand scheme of things," Minaga said, laughing a bit awkwardly. "Even me at my best still has low Wisdom compared to someone like Malefic Viper."

"I definitely concur you're not as wise," Jake fully agreed.

"And now you're back to being needlessly rude, though this time I do recognize it's partly my fault," Minaga muttered.

Jake sighed and shook his head as he kept looking at cosmos a bit more. Over last few days, Minaga had surprisingly left him mostly alone, and no, they were not bunkmates. Ship was more than big enough to provide them all with their own private rooms, and despite being an S-grade, Minaga had been given a room in section with or gods. Seeing as,

you know, he was kind of a god... oh, and fact he kept that same powerful clone he originally appeared with hidden away in his room.

Speaking of gods, all of m were just meditating based on what Jake could see. Even Linea, one currently operating ship, was sitting in meditation, only difference being that she did so on top of a large formation. rightful source is **novel★fire★net**

room assigned to Jake was also quite fancy and from his scans of ship, most luxurious outside of what gods had been provided. Even if gods of Order all treated Jake with respect, that didn't mean he actually ranked above m in hierarchy. He was ultimately still only a mortal, and most of recognition he got from members of Order was more toward Viper than himself.

"So, are you looking forward to visiting Panon of Life?" Minaga asked curiously after silence had apparently pained him for five seconds too long.

Jake turned and looked at Unique Lifeform, and seeing as only two of m were re, he took this chance to ask something that had been boring him. "I'd turn that back around. Why did *you* decide to join this expedition? You could visit Panon of Life at any point if you so desired. re's no reason to go re with Order. In fact, you doing so may make people think you are partial to Malefic Viper. I would judge your actions as pretty damn hard to understand."

"I'm not partial to Malefic Viper," Minaga acted offended. "And I'm not going to Panon of Life with Order eir. I'm going re with some of my favorite Nevermore attendees of all time!"

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"And more serious answer?" Jake followed up.

"Legitimately, without any joking around, I decided to tag along just because I felt like it. I like to experience new things, and new things tend to happen when you're around. Fun new things. Interesting new things," Minaga said, turning a lot more serious. "I've experienced countless lives, explored most of what multiverse has to offer – what won't kill my clone instantly anyway – and it's hard finding new things that pique my interest. You know how some gods complain that eternity can get boring? Well, imagine how I feel, having to experience eternity simultaneously with every single version of me at once."

"That's... honestly a good point," Jake had to admit. "Doesn't really fully explain why you are way you are, though."

"It totally does," Minaga answered confidently. "I am this way because I can be this way. Because it's more fun. Have I legitimately pissed off a lot of people, including gods?"

Sure thing, but what are y gonna do about it? Same with some factions not liking that I travel with Order. I don't care. y have no recourse. Sure, y can complain, but why would I care? In fact, I could easily retaliate. Did you know I can ban people from Nevermore? Because I can totally ban people from Nevermore. Well, technically, Wyrmgod can ban people from Nevermore, but if I ask really nicely, he tends to agree. So, yeah, I am way I am because no one is able to force me to be something else."

"Anor good point," Jake once more had to admit. "And... I almost wanna say that's kind of an admirable attitude?"

"Does that mean we can be bunkmates now?" Minaga asked with hope in his voice.

"re aren't even any bunks in rooms."

"I could make one. Just take two beds, slap m on top of each or, and boom, we got a bunk bed," Minaga said with a grin.

" answer remains no," Jake vehemently rejected.

"You're still so mean... I bet you wouldn't have rejected me if I were a wood elf goddess from Panon of Life named Artemis," Minaga said, acting all hurt.

Jake had to give Minaga credit where credit was due, he had managed to not bring Artemis up before now. Based on what Jake knew, only a few people in multiverse knew what had gone down in Colosseum of Mortals within Nevermore, total likely less than could be counted on one's fingers.

Minaga was one of m, and Jake had fully expected him to bring it up constantly to tease him, a bit same way Villy had. That's why he had to give Unique Lifeform at least some credit for not having done so. As for what he said...

"No, if you were Artemis, I wouldn't reject that at all," Jake simply answered honestly.

"See, and I find that highly discriminatory. What does she have that I don't?"

Jake just stared at Unique Lifeform for a few seconds.

"Alright, point taken, but I'm still allowed to be at least a tiny little bit offended," Minaga halfway admitted defeat.

"If that's your prerogative," Jake shrugged. "By way, you answered why you wanted to travel with us to Panon of Life, but not what you plan on doing re... and before you even think about asking, no, you're not gonna be glued to me while re."

"Now, I may have questionable judgment in most areas, but even I wouldn't expect that," Minaga said. "Believe it or not, I have a legitimate purpose for going. Panon of

Life is known to cultivate some very interesting plant monster variants, and y even have a garing of new monsters from integrated universe, so I'm going to check those out and document m. This documentation can n be used to create those creatures within Nevermore for next upcoming floors."

"Color me impressed. It sounds like you're actually doing your job," Jake commented, surprised.

"What? No, that isn't my job. That's job of this or extremely popular, handsome, and smart god. I'm mainly just going to hang out," Minaga said with a big smile. "But don't you worry, I have ors besides you I can hang out with."

"That's comforting," Jake sighed.

"Do you think it's gonna be awkward, by way?" Minaga asked.

Jake already had a good idea of what Unique Lifeform was asking about but still asked for clarification. "What's gonna be awkward?"

"Meeting Artemis for real. Sure, you two have bumped into one anor, but you only ever had any real interaction with her image within Nevermore. real deal is gonna be quite a bit different, seeing as she's not a level 0 mortal here but an actual god," Minaga said, taking a deep breath.

"And not a weak god eir. Last I checked, Artemis was at Ninth Layer of Divinity, and she's bound to become a Godqueen pretty soonish. Oh, by way, I totally assume you know about Layers of Divinity. Anyway, that means she isn't a nobody, and what's more, she's highly trusted by both Yggdrasil and Nature's Attendant. Did you know she used to be Yggdrasil's Chosen back in day? I think biggest difference between Nevermore and now is that back in re, things like status didn't overly matter, while out here, it's all way too many people even care about."

Minaga had quite a rant, making it obvious he'd been thinking about this topic quite a lot. Jake could only see one reason why he could have done so as he smiled.

"Are you worried about me?"

"What!? No! No, totally not, I'm just personally interested in things going well for both parties involved. This entire debacle started within Nevermore, and as one of top people in charge of Nevermore, I feel a personal responsibility to avoid disaster as we don't have any liability insurance that covers this kind of thing," Minaga said, trying to sound as business-like as he possibly could. It wasn't working very well.

"Thanks for concern, but I'll be fine," Jake shook his head. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little nervous, but at this point, I'll just let chips fall where y may. I only know

what I'll do and what I feel, and I guess only thing left to do is meet up. Besides, what's worst that can happen?"

"She could kill you," Minaga pointed out.

"Eh, I doubt it'll go that far," Jake shrugged.

"But it could."

"Nah, it'll be fine," Jake kept being casual.

Minaga didn't seem to entirely agree but didn't argue either as he sighed. "Well, good luck either way. Also, you're totally visiting Panon of Life for more than just to see Artemis, right?"

"I was invited by Nature's Attendant and Dina originally, so yeah, I'm definitely gonna see and hang out with me a bit alongside Sylphie and old man," Jake answered. "I'm sure I'll also end up meeting Yggdrasil, though that may be more in a professional capacity than a private one."

Minaga nodded before tilting his head. "You are going to ask Yggdrasil to help you out, right?"

Jake sighed as he thought they were done with that topic as he looked at S-grade clone. "I already told you, whatever happens in that department is entirely between Artemis and myself, and I don't plan on getting anyone—"

"Wow, you're starting to sound downright obsessed! Without any prompting, you instantly assume I'm talking about her. Just... wow," Minaga said, acting incredibly astonished. "For record, my question had nothing to do with her!"

Feeling pretty damn baited into giving a response he had, Jake wanted to ask Unique Lifeform what he had meant instead, but clone just kept shaking his head. "You know what? I think I'm gonna leave you with your own thoughts as you do seem pretty stuck in me right now."

"Dude, just tell me outright what you meant," Jake said with exasperation.

"No, no, it's way too late for that," Minaga shook his head. "Would be way too big of a shift in topic anyway, which could make the end of this otherwise semi-pleasant conversation awkward. Anyway, to summarize what the rest of our conversation after this would have been in a swift fashion: I would ask if you planned on also going hunting while here, you would say yes, I would tease you again, you would ignore me teasing you, and I would end up recommending a particular hunting ground that you would have forgotten the name of before today was over."

“Now that’s not fair, I tend to remember stuff I care about, and I care about good hunting grounds,” Jake countered, it now being his time to act offended.

“I never said I’d recommend a good hunting ground,” Minaga answered.

“... fair enough... yeah, I’d probably forget in that case. Mainly because I’d never commit it to memory in first place,” Jake said, at least knowing himself well enough to admit that.

“Yeah, I can see it be hard committing anything to memory when your head is only filled with dreams of a certain wood elf goddess who-“

“I thought you were leaving?” Jake interrupted Unique Lifeform.

“Hey, if I ever find myself in a similar situation, you totally have permission to also tease me,” Minaga said as he raised his hands. “Just keep in mind that as a Unique Lifeform, I’m unable to reproduce, and due to that, I do not have any kind of biological drive making me interested in seeking long-term romantic relationships with or beings.”

“I guess I can also head down to my cabin, got some nice reading material waiting for me down re,” Jake sighed as he began to walk toward elevator that would take him back down into ship.

“Don’t misunderstand!” Minaga yelled after him as if he had just pursued Jake through an airport and had been stopped at security but still wanted to yell out his final confession. “I can still be swept up in raw emotions of a powerful bromance! I still have hope! We still have hope!”

Yeah, Jake wasn’t sure he planned on leaving his cabin again before y arrived at ir destination... ah, who was he kidding? Jake low-key enjoyed fucking with Minaga knowing Unique Lifeform was perfectly willing to clap back in his own Minaga ways.

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Chapter 1089: Panon Of Life

Panon of Life was a relatively unique faction in multiverse.

Most huge Primordial factions strived to increase territory y controlled, wanted to expand ir power, and actively recruited gods to join m in order to compete with or

factions for resources. Even Order of Malefic Viper was part of this eternal competition, as to m, increasing power of faction was most important thing.

Meanwhile, Panon of Life had its primary objective elsewhere. It was in name that faction was all about concept of life. While Risen also cared about death affinity, y did so mainly because of importance of concept to ir power. Panon of Life, on or hand, strived to merely allow and push existence of life.

Despite life seemingly being incredibly prevalent in multiverse, it was actually quite rare. For every planet in existence with life, thousands existed devoid of it. All se planets were still filled with creatures, primarily elementals, which also resulted in elementals being most numerous archetype of creature in entire multiverse, and it wasn't even a close competition. However, seeing as elementals were also one of few types of creatures that could get incredibly powerful while still not becoming sapient—or even sentient in some instances—ir ability to evolve tended to be near-nonexistent.

That's also why few factions tended to care about se dead planets. Sure, y technically had creatures living on m, but more than anything, y were nothing more than hunting locations or places to harvest resources. Even if all elementals were killed on se planets, new ones would simply appear with time due to mana in air garing and giving birth to m.

same most certainly couldn't be said about actual lifeforms. In many instances, way life even came to or planets was through meteorites carrying biological material or even living creatures. se creatures could n grow, evolve, and reproduce. In addition, life led to more life, as when life affinity on a planet got stronger, plants could begin to appear simply due environment, and if conditions were right, a feedback loop would begin.

This was a process that took many years, and a lot of things had to go right. ecosystems that appeared had to be balanced, allowing creatures re to grow and not stagnate, and if it didn't, environment could quickly fall apart.

Life itself was an incredibly fragile thing, especially in its infancy. Once life was eliminated from a planet, it was borderline impossible for it to return without outside influence. What's more, in many instances, it was ecosystem itself that gave birth to what would eventually be downfall of all life on a planet.

Malefic Viper himself was a great example of this. He had solely been responsible for wiping out all life on his planet. He had been born as part of ecosystem of world, but he was too powerful for it and ended up destroying it entirely. While he could have most certainly left planet behind and taken to universe earlier, he hadn't even known that was an option in first place, which was, surprisingly enough, far from a unique case.

A powerful monster born on a planet without any outside influence was like a frog in a well. All it knew was environment it was born into. monster wouldn't know taking to stars was even an option. planet was its entire world, and through its instinct to grow

stronger, it would eventually find and kill everything... unless re was outside interference.

This was where Panon of Life usually stepped in.

As a faction, its goal was to preserve and encourage flourishing of life. y didn't merely train in concept of life, but everything that surrounded life. Everything that helped create and nourish life. ecosystem, environment, creatures within it, and tight balance that had to be maintained. That's also why some questioned if Panon of Life was even a fitting name for m or if perhaps calling m Panon of Nature would be more accurate.

Nature and life were heavily intertwined, and one was a prerequisite for or. Like many or affinities similar to it, nature affinity was also a fusion between life, earth, water, and several or powerful affinities, but what truly made it an affinity was how nature mana acted.

Too much life energy would lead to what was effectively a tumorous growth. It was actively harmful in too high doses and could cause many unwanted things, something Jake had seen first-hand in Undergrowth dungeon.

nature affinity, on or hand, possessed an inherent concept of balance. Too much nature mana wouldn't cause mutations, but simply growth. If a barren world were flooded with nature mana, plants would grow and begin spreading, and no matter how much one increased intensity and quantity of nature mana, newly grown plants wouldn't die. Instead, more would grow, or existing life would absorb as much nature affinity mana as it could. In some instances, nature mana would even disperse on its own, turning into affinity-less mana simply because nothing was around that it could nurture. It would rar self-destruct than ruin natural balance.

Of course, for nature to exist in any capacity, re had to be life in first place. Nature was merely requirement for life to grow and flourish on its own. That's also why Panon of Life perhaps wasn't an entirely inaccurate name for Primordial faction, as while nature was important to m, very concept of life itself took precedence.

So, in summary... Panon of Life consisted of a bunch of nature-freak hippies. At least, that was Jake's assessment after he properly read up on faction during last day of voyage. Originally, he hadn't really planned on reading up on anything but just learn about Panon of Life by going re. However, he'd gotten kind of curious after y'd stopped by a particular planet. re, Jake saw an A-grade expert approach a newly evolved B-grade beast with intent of having it leave for somewhere it wouldn't become a disaster to local ecosystem.

In some ways, it seemed unnatural to interfere like that, which was perhaps also why Panon of Life wasn't called Panon of Nature... because if leaving nature alone to do its thing would lead to loss of all life, faction would gladly step in. Which was exactly what Jake saw with that newly evolved B-grade beast.

This beast in question was one of dark affinity, and it had already begun to cover skies of its planet in black smog by time A-grade appeared. This dark energy would block out rays of sun, which would inevitably lead to death of most life on planet, if not all of it. Jake had watched and expected B-grade beast to agree to leave, but instead, it had refused and claimed itself as owner of planet.

A-grade tried to convince beast but ultimately failed. After failing, expert merely left, which made Jake wonder if planet was just fucked... until around half an hour later when a party of peak C-grades appeared to hunt down beast.

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That was when Jake realized that Panon of Life was fully willing to interfere with natural order of things if natural order threatened too much life. Or, more accurately, if it threatened fragile balance that allowed life to continue existing.

y didn't seem to care overly much about will of actual creatures re, only big picture. It did get a bit weird when Jake read that Panon of Life was also multiverse's top exporter of wood. Find newest release on novel✕

On that note, Jake had kind of assumed wood to be a very normal resource, considering how darn much of it y had on Earth and many or planets he'd gone to. However, surprisingly enough, wood was considered a quite valuable resource in most instances.

It took a lot of time to grow if one wanted high-quality wood, and second of all, for wood to exist, re had to be life – outside of a few fringe cases, that is. Meanwhile, for stuff like metals, one could find near-infinite amounts by just exploring a few asteroid belts or so-called dead planets.

So from an economical standpoint, it made sense Panon of Life sold a lot of wood, but Jake wasn't sure if logic tracked.

Jake admittedly found entire doctrine of faction a bit confusing despite having studied it, but in his defense... y didn't really have an official doctrine per-se. It all seemed very much up to interpretation, which, in retrospect, perhaps was point.

He also remembered his talks with Artemis during Challenge Dungeon. She clearly had her own interpretation and cared about fitting into nature as a hunter. Jake could even agree with her and Panon of Life about many things, including that threatened ecosystems were probably a bad idea.

Unless said ecosystem consisted of mushroom men. In that case, Jake found it obligatory to step in and be arbiter of justice by wiping out every single one of m, no matter what.

I do wonder what kind of hunting grounds Panon of Life has, considering its ideology... Jake thought as he decided it was time to exit his little cabin on the spaceship. About half an hour prior, the voice of the god called Linea had echoed throughout the vessel, letting them all know they would arrive at its final destination in roughly an hour.

Jake didn't have a lot of preparations to make, but he'd still cleaned himself up a bit and even put on clothing that wasn't his regular armor... only to put back on his armor again as he felt that was more fitting for this kind of meeting. Besides, he thought he looked better wearing it.

Walking up through the corridors inside the ship, Jake passed by Sylphie's cabin and knocked. Inside, he could already see Sylphie in the midst of using wind magic to juggle all the bedding, and the moment she heard him, she expertly controlled all the things and made them gently fall back where they belonged.

The door opened a second later, and Jake found Sylphie sitting on the floor right inside, looking up at him with big eyes. She was looking nice in her little spatial storage vest that she'd made visible for the occasion, something he got a strong feeling she wanted him to acknowledge.

"Looking good," Jake smiled as he squatted down and scratched her on the top of her head. "And you did great during the trip."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched cheerfully as she kept looking up at Jake. He knew what she wanted and sighed as he picked her up in a hug and stood up to carry the little hawk, who was happily snuggling in his embrace.

"People are gonna look at us weird if we meet representatives from Panon of Life like this," Jake said.

"Ree?"

"No, I don't think sitting on top of my head is a good idea either... how about we compromise and agree on the shoulder this time around? That way, you can stand perched and really show off," Jake said in a convincing tone.

Sylphie considered for a bit before agreeing. A minute or so later, just before they made it to the deck above, the hawk jumped up and sat on his shoulder. Through his sphere, Jake could already see that two of them were some of the last people to arrive, though a few more were walking up elsewhere on the ship.

In general, using any kind of space magic while traveling on a ship like this was a great way to accidentally hurt or even kill yourself. Even A and S-grades avoided teleporting despite most of them being able to. Only one who clearly didn't care was Minaga, though considering his actual status as a god, his insight into the concept of space surpassed

every or mortal on vessel combined times a thousand... with even that being a very conservative estimate. Oh yeah, and even if he did die, he wouldn't care much.

Walking onto deck, Jake and Sylphie naturally attracted ir fair share of attention. A few gave polite nods or bows toward two, with only one person walking over to speak with m.

"Did you two enjoy journey?" Sword Saint asked. Despite being on same ship for this entire time, three of m hadn't met up before this, as old man had been in his cabin most of time. times he did go up, he went to bridge, where Jake remembered seeing him paint.

Meanwhile, Jake also spent nearly all his time meditating and reading tome left by First Sage. He'd made some good progress, too. few times Jake did leave his cabin old man had remained in his. Heck, even time Jake saw newly evolved B-grade and that entire debacle, he'd been in his own cabin with a Minaga having snuck in after convincing Jake he just had to show him what was going on with a nearby planet.

At least Minaga hadn't been lying about that one... anyway.

"Yeah, it was fine for most part," Jake answered old man after a second of thinking.

"Ree!" Sylphie answered in negative, having found sitting in her cabin pretty damn boring. Jake was proud she'd managed to do it, though, and from what he understood, hawk had taken it as a challenge to prove she could meditate for a prolonged period, and she'd only woken up due to announcement y were about to arrive.

In all honesty, Jake had not expected her to last entire trip, much less that hawk would have been productive. From what hawk briefly told him, she had used this time to try and connect with her Soulspace after having heard Jake's tales of world he had created within himself. This also once more served as a stark reminder that Jake being able to so easily enter his Soulspace and have so much control in re wasn't usual.

"Finding peace and solace when you only have yourself as company is a requirement for someone aiming toward top," Sword Saint said to Sylphie after her complaint. "If you cannot do that, your future will be filled with needless suffering. Better to learn sooner rar than later and slowly adapt rar than one day find yourself isolated for a prolonged period."

Jake nodded along to old man's words. "I gotta agree re. I know it sometimes sucks, but independence is great, and while you don't need to go hermit route, relying on or people too much can be dangerous when you do end up alone."

"I don't think your advice is most useful in this area," Sword Saint said with a smile. "You're a natural loner. Meanwhile, Sylphie is quite opposite."

"Gotta agree re," a new voice suddenly joined conversation as a certain Unique Lifeform had decided to teleport in. "You know, I watched how everyone did my solo Labyrinth in Nevermore, and a part of difficulty for many is pure sense of isolation y get. In all or Challenge Dungeons, re were or people to interact with, but in my Labyrinth, re was nobody. Well, besides me. Believe it or not, main reason why I am so actively talking to people during Labyrinth is to help those who deal badly with isolation. After I started doing it, it has helped statistics for people quitting due to pure loneliness, which is definitely good in my mind. I want m to quit over not being able to do actual Labyrinth."

"I don't believe that it's main reason you're such a yapper," Jake said in a dry tone. "You do it because you can't help yourself and because you get bored."

"What, me? Bored? Never!" Minaga acted all insulted. "I'm super good at keeping myself company, and I always have a clone in handy to talk to someone in case I want some social interaction. In fact, you can take pride in knowing that you are entertaining entire All-God Legion right at this very moment with your amusing misunderstanding of my personality!"

"Ree."

"... my Labyrinth wasn't super easy. You were just a cheater," Minaga muttered.

"Ree..."

"You know exactly what you did."

"Ree."

"I have footage," Minaga proclaimed.

"Ree."

"... alright, you got me, I have nothing," S-grade Unique Lifeform sighed in defeat.

"Ree."

"Yeah, yeah," Minaga waved her off before quickly changing topic as he pointed forward. "Oh, hey, look. A tree."

Jake was about to call out god's bullshit again as y were still traveling at insane speeds, making seeing anything borderline impossible... yet when Jake turned around...

That's one giant-ass tree...

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Chapter 1090: Destination Reached

Jake thought trees he had seen on Earth were big, and sure, compared to before system, y had indeed been utterly massive. However, when he looked at monstrosity of wood so far away that he couldn't even begin to guess distance, he couldn't help but feel like y were tiny in comparison. Standing before something like that made even Jake feel small.

He wasn't only one, eir. Nearly all of people on vessel were standing in awe as y marveled at great tree in front of m. No one had to tell m who or what y were looking at eir. Despite being out of her range, every person present knew y were laying eyes on Yggdrasil, one of Primordials and leader of Panon of Life.

"How far away are we?" Jake asked as he kept staring, asking primarily because massive tree wasn't getting much larger despite how fast y were going.

"No idea, but we still got like twenty minutes left till we reach Great Planet Yggdrasil is on," Minaga shrugged while obviously enjoying everyone's reaction.

Chances were that none of people present – besides gods and perhaps a few S-grades – had ever visited inner area of Panon of Life before. This was thus ir first time seeing Yggdrasil, and honestly, who could blame m for ir reactions?

Looking at Yggdrasil, Jake naturally didn't know what kind of tree she was, but she looked a lot like an ash tree. trunk was long and sturdy, with a crown so utterly massive that Jake didn't doubt entire worlds could be hidden within. entire tree also looked incredibly healthy, with green leaves everywhere eye could see if one looked toward crown.

It was very evident that Records had bled into ir recently integrated universe because tree in front of him looked pretty much exactly like what Jake would expect World Tree to be. It was close enough that he suspected some entertainment franchises of having actually glimpsed into first universe to accurately depict World Tree.

What none of m could have depicted was sheer aura. Merely by looking at tree, Jake could feel its overflowing life energy. Currently, vessel y were on was covered by a powerful barrier to keep m safe during voyage, but Jake didn't doubt that second it was dispelled, overflowing life affinity energy would rush in.

"You know what's even more impressive?" Minaga said after a minute or so of silence as y all stared at tree that was rapidly growing in size as y got closer. "Yggdrasil isn't even largest creature in multiverse. She's close, don't get me wrong, but Starseizing Titan is still larger. What's more... two of m are both still growing as eras pass, which does make me and ors wonder if one day a Great Planet isn't enough for Yggdrasil."

By now, Jake and everyone else couldn't just see tree but even more massive Great Planet she was planted on, and while Yggdrasil was utterly massive, compared to a Great Planet, she still had ways to go. Of course, he had no idea how deep her roots went, though, but he got feeling she still had a long time to go before she could outgrow her current home.

"I don't think that's an immediate issue," Jake muttered.

"Probably not," Minaga shrugged. "And if it does turn into a problem, I'm sure Yggdrasil can find a solution. Or Nature's Attendant. By that time, she should also be powerful enough to move entire Great Planets, so worst case, she could just slam a few toger and make a... Greater Planet?"

"Ultra Planet. Ultra comes after great," Jake said in a joking voice.

"And after that, I believe we would have Master Planets," Sword Saint chimed in, making Jake stare at old man with surprise.

"What? I can understand some references, too," old man said, as he kept looking at Yggdrasil. "And I must say... this sight is quite inspiring, and I shall certainly fully commit it to memory with hopes of depicting it on canvas later."

"Probably good for your Profession. Which does make me wonder what kind of things you could create with a few of those leaves..." Jake muttered, getting a look from Minaga.

"That was pretty heretical of you to say," Unique Lifeform commented.

"Not really, I'm just wondering out loud," Jake shrugged. "You can't tell me that armorers all over multiverse haven't wondered what you could create with scales from Wyrmgod or Malefic Viper."

"Well, sure, but people usually don't say that kind of thing out loud," Minaga pointed out. "Could piss off a lot of ir followers."

"That sounds like a m problem and not a me problem," Jake said unbored.

"I guess that's kind of mentality you need to dare get intimate with gods. A willingness to not care about norms or decorum," Minaga teased him telepathically, at least having enough sense not to speak that kind of thing out loud.

“Don’t act as if you don’t love that about me,” Jake teased back. source of this content is *novel•fire•met*

“Guilty as charged,” Minaga smiled and chuckled, returning to speaking out loud after waving his hand and creating a fully transparent sound-isolating barrier around himself, Jake, Sylphie, and Sword Saint. “Seeing as Nature’s Attendant invited you here despite knowing what kind of guy you are, things should be fine. If not... well, it was nice knowing you.”

Jake just smiled and shook his head as he kept watching ever-growing tree that filled more and more of his vision as time went on. ir destination truly was heartlands of Panon of Life as y would land on Great Planet that was effectively ruled by faction. Technically speaking, Panon of Life didn’t have full control over it, as a few factions had ir own territories that could roughly be equated to countries. And, yes, it was part of all diplomats’ – especially gods’ – job to begin talks for Order of Malefic Viper to have same thing.

Minutes passed as y got closer, until soon enough, ship began to slow down. surrounding world became distinguishable once more, and all Jake could see filling his vision when he looked downwards was massive Great Planet that was so huge that, despite floating who-knows-how-far above surface, it still looked like a flat plane in all directions.

With ship flying slower, barrier surrounding it also weakened, and as it did, Jake felt expected mana in air rapidly experience change. Nature and life mana rushed in and filled air all around m, making especially Sylphie perk up.

“Ree, ree?” hawk screeched, looking around before finally deciding on a direction to stare toward.

“re are?” Jake asked, turning to Minaga for answers.

Unique Lifeform shrugged in response. “Wouldn’t surprise me if re was. It’s a Great Planet, after all, and those kinds of creatures do tend to like living in life-filled areas.”

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Jake slowly nodded as he couldn’t help but frown. Sylphie had told him that moment barrier was down, she could hear whispers of wind far louder than before. What’s more, she heard whispers speaking of creatures like her extremely far away.

Seeing as wind had told Sylphie this and that hybrid beast and elemental creatures weren’t really a thing usually, Jake assumed that what Sylphie was hearing was whispers about her namesake: Sylphs.

Sylphs were all powerful wind elementals of at least A-grade, though many of them were also S-grade. What's more, all of them were old and possessed high intelligence despite being elementals. In general, they also tended to be gentle, with many Sylphs often being protectors of local areas.

Jake also remembered reading that many Sylphs were proficient in using nature affinity, so their being on Great Planet truly did make sense. Despite knowing that Sylphs tended to be nice to others, Jake was still a bit nervous knowing they were there because Sylphie obviously wanted to go visit them.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked just that, looking up at Jake.

"I can't tell you not to go," Jake said with a smile.

"She'll be totally fine," Minaga said, shaking his head. "Remember, she could use Dreamy Embrace of Benevolent Sylph I gave her during Nevermore for beating me up. As someone loved by wind, there's no way other Sylphs wouldn't at least feel positively toward her. Plus, she's blessed by Stormild. Most Sylphs view Stormild very favorably, with many of them even worshipping Primordial."

"I would still ask Panon of Life to provide escorts," Jake muttered.

"Oh, for sure," Minaga agreed. "I'm sure they will also know plenty about these Sylphs. If such creatures are living on our Great Planet, you'll surely know about them and likely even be in regular contact. Especially seeing as it sounds like we have a gathering of them."

"Yeah, Sylphs definitely don't sound like regularly encountered creatures," Jake nodded.

Jake still didn't feel super comfortable about her going, but he didn't have much time to ponder on it anymore as the ship was very quickly descending toward ground, making him walk toward the edge. It didn't take long before he noticed its landing location, which made his eyes open wide.

"Is that a root?" he asked S-grade beside him, who had a god clone hidden elsewhere on the ship.

"Yep," Minaga nodded. "Seems rude when you think about it that we're gonna land on top of a Primordial..."

Jake wanted to comment, but before he could, a new aura appeared that instantly made all of the people present freeze. It was the aura of a god who had come from within the ship, and a moment later, said god teleported onto the bridge.

It was a god who looked like a beastkin – which meant he could have either been a beastkin or just a beast when a mortal – and Jake guessed he was still an early-tier

god. This god appeared right in front of Jake and ors, which made it clear who y were re for.

“Chosen of Malefic One, you are summoned by Grand Elder to his chambers,” god said, not sounding particularly respectful, which was honestly a bit refreshing.

“Alright,” Jake nodded. “Will I return here after, or...?”

“I believe Grand Elder plans for you to go with us from here on, but you should have time to meet up with your companions later,” god answered.

“I’m gonna stay here and take care of se two,” Minaga said, trying to sound both reliable and sacrificial.

“You know I am fully aware your or clone is with gods, right?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t see how that has anything to do with me,” Unique Lifeform said, acting confused. “Anyway, looking forward to seeing you again!”

Jake just sighed as he gave god a nod. A second later, he was teleported into one of chambers of gods, where he found Duskleaf sitting in a chair with all or gods brought by Order also present... oh, and a Unique Lifeform who threw Jake a cheeky smile as he entered.

“I have brought Chosen,” god who’d teleported Jake said before teleporting again to sit down in his chair. Jake felt like a scrub as he couldn’t just teleport around but had to manually walk toward a chair and sit down himself.

He completely ignored many gods staring him down as he did this, only addressing m all when he was seated. “You asked for me to be here?”

Jake naturally asked Duskleaf directly, who just nodded in response. “Right... you will go with us to meet divine delegation of Panon of Life here to welcome us.”

“Grand Elder, are you sure it’s wise for Chosen to join us? I know that Malefic Viper treats him uniquely, but he’s still only a mortal,” one of gods present commented as if Jake wasn’t even re.

Duskleaf looked at god and tilted his head. “Were you invited here by Panon of Life?”

god looked confused for a moment before shaking ir head.

“Was any of you invited by Panon of Life?” he asked all or gods, getting no response besides Minaga, who raised a hand as high as he could, but Grand Elder completely ignored him.

"In fact, I believe only a single person here was directly invited to visit Panon of Life by two influential gods from here, one of m being Nature's Attendant himself," Duskleaf said. "His invitation is impetus for us to visit in first place. For us not even to bring him with us when we meet one who invited him would just be needlessly rude. He is a mortal, yes, but in this case, I find that utterly irrelevant, and clearly, Nature's Attendant does too. I don't think any of us have right to tell him who he can and can't invite."

Jake had wanted to speak up for himself, but instead, he found himself silently shocked at Duskleaf's entire demeanor. He seemed so much different than he usually was and even carried an air of authority. Truthfully, Jake had questioned a few times why Villy had decided that Duskleaf would be good at leading academy, as in Jake's mind, he was just an alchemy nerd who didn't care about doing anything else than just in his lab. However, now, he saw that it certainly wasn't because Duskleaf wasn't capable. Jake had definitely underestimated old alchemist, that was for sure.

After Duskleaf spoke, gods who were opposed to Jake's presence quickly backed off, and while he felt confident many of m still didn't approve of his presence re, none of m showed it outwardly.

Duskleaf, after speaking, also looked at Jake as alchemist's voice echoed in his head.

"You have gifts given to you by Master, right? That's another reason why you need to be with us, but I didn't want to mention it here," Duskleaf said.

"Yeah, I got m," Jake answered. *"Also, I must say I'm genuinely impressed. way you handled-"*

"Jake, I hate every second of what's going on right now and just want to get all this over with so I can begin my work," Duskleaf cut him off. *"This is all such a waste of time, and if it wasn't because I needed something from here, I wouldn't have gone..."*

"Fair," Jake just answered, holding back a small smile. Duskleaf was indeed still Duskleaf.

"As it seems like no one has anything else to say, let's go. Nature's Attendant already made contact," Duskleaf spoke after a few seconds of silence as he stood up. "We will arrive directly in lower outer sections of Yggdrasil's trunk."

Jake, who'd barely even sat down, stood up again as Duskleaf lifted a hand. A magic circle appeared beneath m all and slowly began powering up for a few seconds before teleportation activated, and Jake realized reason why Duskleaf used this slower method was to give everyone a moment to prepare for what would come next.

teleportation circle activated, and a moment later, y arrived at ir final destination. As y did, Jake felt many things at once. first thing that struck him was mana in air. It was so

dense and full of life and nature energy that it was nearly suffocating, and if this energy wasn't actively being controlled, Jake feared it could have even caused him harm.

Secondly was presences. So far, y'd all been able to feel y were in Yggdrasil's domain, but it wasn't oppressive in any way. Now, however, y were truly in presence of Yggdrasil. Within massive wooden hall that y now found mselves in, several figures were waiting for m, with especially two being of note for all people present.

One of m was a man Jake recognized from Nevermore. It was Nature's Attendant, who stood with his usual staff and a light smile on his face. At his side was a woman who'd grown out of ground, her appearance reminding Jake slightly of Dina's. Her aura was even more powerful than Nature's Attendant, and instantly, Jake knew she was Primordial whose body y were currently inside.

After teleporting into chamber, Jake saw several of gods present look pressured, though none of m showed it much. Not that he was looking at m overly much, because his attention was on something else.

As everyone was looking at Nature's Attendant and Yggdrasil, Jake's eyes wandered elsewhere as he looked toward one of few dozen gods behind m and locked eyes with a fellow hunter he hadn't seen since Nevermore.

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Chapter 1091: Delegation's Arrival

Artemis teleported across Great Planet as she answered summons of Yggdrasil. Not that she had to be summoned in first place, as she'd fully planned on being present when people from Order of Malefic Viper arrived. This was a day she'd been waiting for, after all.

Soon enough, she was at trunk of Mor Tree. Her former Patron gave her permission to enter, and with a single teleport, Artemis appeared within Primordial, which was also where y planned on conducting meeting with divine delegation from Order.

Instantly upon appearing, Artemis felt pressure of Yggdrasil's aura, but luckily, y weren't that close to crown where pressure was highest. Unlike most gods in multiverse, Yggdrasil had directly incorporated her Divine Realm into her body, keeping all of it hidden within crown of tree, which was also what had given birth to grand world hidden within.

last time Artemis went to meet Yggdrasil, y had been closer to crown, but as plan wasn't to intimidate Order of Malefic Viper, re was no need for Yggdrasil's aura to put unnecessary pressure on m. Some pressure was still a good idea, though, and no place in entire Panon of Life was safer than within Yggdrasil.

Within trunk, Artemis found she was far from only one who'd been summoned. Nature's Attendant was already re, along with over a dozen or high-ranking gods from Panon of Life. Most of m were Godqueens and Godkings, but a few of m were of lower ranks, primarily present because y specialized in political matters.

As for why Artemis was re... well, some did question that.

"Artemis, I'm surprised you decided to attend a garing like this," a Godqueen called Nimera said with genuine surprise when she noticed newcomer. "With your true body, even. What's occasion?"

"I attend sometimes," Artemis answered, seeing no need to disclose any personal details. It was true she didn't usually take part in se kinds of things, but it wasn't as if she was never re. Chapters first released on [novel◇fire◇net](#)

"Sure, but that still makes this a rarity," Nimera continued with a smile. Artemis knew or god had no ill intent with her words, and she would consider m friends as y'd gotten close after spending a couple of millennia hunting toger only a few million years ago.

"I invited her here," Nature's Attendant spoke up for Artemis.

"Oh?" Nimera looked at second-in-command of entire faction with surprise. "How come? You two are really getting me curious."

Nature's Attendant threw Artemis a glance before he answered. "You remember when associates of Wyrmgod sought us out not that long before integration of ninety-third universe happened?"

"I do," Nimera nodded. "y wanted images for that Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon in C-grade section of Nevermore, right?"

"y did," Artemis took over. "And I provided one."

"Now that I hadn't heard," Nimera said. "I guess your presence does make some sense, n. That Chosen of Malefic Viper will be part of delegation, so you being here along with Nature's Attendant will at least mean re are some familiar faces."

Artemis nodded, happy that topic was seemingly swept over in such a clean fashion. At least, that was what she'd hoped.

“Hey, seeing as your image was used, you got recordings of fight, right? Or at least you can request recordings? Can I see m at some point?” Nimera asked, once more just innocently curious.

However, considering recording Artemis had received held quite a bit of content that wasn't related to an arena fight, she had no interest in sharing it with anyone, much less her friend.

“No, I think I'll keep it to myself,” Artemis said.

“Fine... I guess its value does go up fewer people have seen recording,” Nimera very inaccurately guessed why Artemis didn't want to share her image's escapades with Chosen. “But, can you at least give me a little hint? I know it was just an image of you in re, but from what you saw, did he seem any good?”

“He is new top-scorer of Nevermore Leaderboards,” Artemis merely answered, really wanting to bury topic for now.

“Good point,” Nimera shrugged. “Eir way, I look forward to seeing him. I just hope he can properly handle pressure in here... it's not very healthy for mortals to experience this level of presence.”

“He'll be fine,” a voice echoed throughout chamber as Mor Tree finally revealed herself. Out of wood, a dryad's body began to grow as Yggdrasil manifested a humanoid form to more easily interact with m all. **“Based on what Tonken told me, I couldn't affect him even if I wanted to. Not without directly using my presence to attack.”**

“Surely that's an exaggeration,” Nimera said, looking to Nature's Attendant for answers.

Nature's Attendant just smiled. “Within Nevermore, he had a direct clash of aura with Valdemar, victor undetermined.”

Nimera just stared at Nature's Attendant, clearly finding that claim hard to believe, but considering its source, she had no choice but to believe it.

“From what I understand of Vilas' Chosen, it would be unwise of us to treat him as we regularly would one holding such a title,” Yggdrasil also spoke up. **“He is a rar... unique individual. Despite being a Chosen, he does not appear reverent of his Patron. He respects Malefic Viper, but he does not worship him. Moreover, likely as a result of his Bloodline, he is not only able to resist auras of any or beings, but he is also unable to view himself as a lesser creature to anyone and anything. Even gods.”**

words spoken by Primordial made quite a few of those present frown, with only Artemis and Nature's Attendant subtly nodding along in agreement. Both of m also

knew a bit more about Jake from having interacted with him at least a little, and in addition, Nature's Attendant had shared with her intel y'd bought from Court of Shadows and Nevermore regarding Jake. While y didn't have a lot, both at least had their own subjective understandings that seemed to mostly match up.

“That also appears to be why Malefic Viper treats him almost like an equal. Because to be viewed as his equal is best that any of us can do. You may not approve of him, and you may even find him overly arrogant and full of himself, but if you do, please leave now,” Yggdrasil spoke. **“He is here as a guest for a reason, and if Vilas has decided to see him as an equal, none of you are qualified to do anything less. Moreover, he does have some qualifications for his arrogance, and I would heavily advise against making him a future enemy. He is a hunter, after all.”**

Artemis listened and was quite taken aback, to say least. She understood first warning about how his Bloodline affected Jake, but later portion was entirely unexpected. It was clear Yggdrasil viewed Chosen of Malefic Viper in a very favorable light, something not many of gods present could see reason for. What's more, she even seemed a bit worried.

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Part of it was likely due to what she said about Malefic Viper treating his Chosen like an equal. While Artemis still felt a little doubtful if that was true, it would explain a lot, including recent later play two of m put on to lure in Yip of Yore. Artemis had to confess that after she'd seen what happened, she couldn't help but think if such an attitude wouldn't make him a heretic...

No, that wouldn't make any sense, she quickly dispelled thought. Jake was Chosen of Malefic Viper, and there was no way he could be both a Chosen and a heretic at same time. That would just be way too... unnatural.

“n how should we treat Chosen of Malefic Viper?” one of gods asked.

“With respect,” Nature's Attendant answered. “We will not tell you to treat him like an equal, but we will expect you to at least keep in mind that Malefic One appears to. So even if you do not directly respect Chosen, respect his Patron and thus him in turn. But more than anything, do not disrespect him needlessly, even if he is still only a mortal.”

there were a few nods throughout room, and despite Yggdrasil saying y could leave, no one did. While Artemis knew that none of m entirely understood, she knew y at least respected Mor Tree and Malefic One enough to do what was said.

“y shall be here shortly,” Yggdrasil spoke again as she finally decided to shift her consciousness to dryad body she'd summoned to speak through that. “Be aware that

Chosen of Malefic One and Grand Elder of Academy are not only two notable guests among m. All-God Legion seems to have joined m in ir travels.”

That last part was definitely a surprise to everyone, including Artemis. Sure, she’d known Unique Lifeform had taken an interest in Jake, but she hadn’t expected such a powerful god to tag along with him like this. Alright, sure, Artemis had no proof that All-God Legion was only here because Jake was, but she would stake a lot on that being case.

gods around all chatted with one anor about this sudden piece of news. Many of m wanted to even see if y could take this chance to get closer to All-God Legion, as he was known to be a good person to be friendly with. Artemis didn’t join ir chatter but simply waited until, soon enough, Yggdrasil looked toward a particular spot. “Here y are.”

Less than a second later, a teleportation circle appeared on floor right where Yggdrasil had been looking. magic circle slowly gared power before activating, giving everyone a brief grace period before delegation from Order of Malefic Viper would arrive.

Several more auras appeared within room in an instant as Artemis looked at newcomers. She saw All-God Legion, Grand Elder, and all or gods present, and yet her eyes went toward sole mortal present who stood in back. Nearly all ors who’d arrived had taken a moment to adapt to Yggdrasil’s presence, but he hadn’t even flinched.

Instead, his own eyes had scanned room and met Artemis’ as she stared back into inhuman eyes of a born predator. At that moment, she once more understood what had initially drawn her image within Challenge Dungeon to man.

ir eyes remained locked for a moment before both turned ir gazes away. Now wasn’t time or place yet for m to have ir long overdue talk. No, before that could happen, y both had a job to do as members of ir respective factions.

Jake suppressed a smile after he and Artemis averted ir gazes from one anor. Just from that very brief interaction, a lot of Jake’s worry had been dismissed. Artemis hadn’t looked at Jake with any negative emotions as far as he could tell, though she was definitely not looking at him same way her image had during Nevermore. A difficult talk was still in pipeline, but for now, things seemed pretty okay.

Of course, y couldn’t just stare at one anor without catching attention, so Jake looked away before he assumed ors would think it was weird. Seeing as y’d met in Nevermore, it naturally shouldn’t surprise anyone that Jake recognized her, but he still wanted to keep what had actually happened between himself and Artemis between two of m. At least he wasn’t going to be one spilling any beans.

He kind of wanted to just have his talk with Artemis immediately, but he knew he was work to do first. Luckily for him, he wasn't leader of this little delegation, forcing poor Duskleaf out of his comfort zone no matter how much he hated it.

"This one greets Mor Tree," Duskleaf bowed toward Yggdrasil as he spoke in a respectful tone. "I thank you for allowing our presence, and I hope it can be beginning of something greater."

It was a bit direct and to point, but Yggdrasil seemed appreciative as she looked at old alchemist. "I thank you for coming, Grand Elder. You too, Chosen of Malefic Viper and All-God Legion."

She said last two while looking toward Jake and Minaga, respectively, with Minaga just grinning and scratching back of his head. "I reckoned it would be fine if I tagged along. I did get a standing invitation at some point, right? Well, alright, I technically didn't get any invitation, but one of me definitely did, and we tend to share amongst one another."

Minaga was still Minaga no matter where he was, and once again, no one present seemed at all surprised by how he acted, as even Yggdrasil merely nodded. "You are always welcome in Panon of Life. As long as you respect that this is our home, of course."

"I'm literally inside you right now, I'm well aware I should be respectful," Minaga nodded. "You could kill every single one of us pretty damn quickly if you so desired. Well, except Nature's Attendant, but knowing him, he would help you in squashing us to death."

"You are as interesting as always, Minaga," Yggdrasil said, shaking her head. "Besides, I don't have full confidence that at least one person from Order's delegation wouldn't be able to escape."

Yggdrasil didn't make it clear who she was talking about by looking or motioning toward anyone, but Jake definitely assumed it was Duskleaf. Weirdly enough, others seemed to believe it was Jake based on how many glanced his way when she said that.

Jake had wanted to also introduce himself, but felt a bit awkward doing that now after all or talk. Thus, he just stayed silent as Duskleaf spoke up again.

"It has been, what, two eras since I last set foot within domain of Panon of Life? I must say, development has been splendid, and number of planets teeming with life within your influence has expanded more than I originally projected," Duskleaf said, laying it on thick with flattering.

"Things have indeed been going as we'd hoped," Nature's Attendant jumped in and spoke. "I can feel from you that your progress has also been worthwhile. I attended an auction recently with one of your creations, and it was certainly main attraction."

“Oh, I believe I know what you’re talking about, and I may just have happened to bring along something very similar,” Duskleaf continued. Two older-looking men were definitely going a bit overboard from Jake’s perspective, but he couldn’t really say anything. He was also wondering when he was supposed to give Nature’s Attendant and Yggdrasil bottles he’d been given by Villy.

On one hand, doing it with everyone else present would show off a bit, but on the other hand, he had no idea if Villy would have wanted him to reveal gifts to everyone. He considered asking Duskleaf but, for now, decided just to stand back. If the alchemist wanted Jake to hand stuff over, he could damn well tell him to.

After two old men had been talking about mostly nothing for a little while, with Minaga not even trying to hide how bored he was, Nature’s Attendant finally changed subject.

“Ah, where are my manners,” he said as he finally turned toward Jake. “I was one who invited you, and yet I just let you stand there. I do apologize for my rudeness, and I’m glad to see you found time to visit so soon.”

“I should be one thanking you for having me,” Jake said, trying to be polite. “So far, the trip has definitely been worth it just going by sights I’ve seen.”

“I’m glad to hear that, and I naturally hope to make this trip even more worth your time. I do believe I owe you a favor, correct?” Nature’s Attendant asked, though, in reality, it was more him announcing to everyone present that he owed Jake something.

“You did insist on that,” Jake nodded, not wanting to make it seem as if he’d asked Nature’s Attendant for a favor. He had been one offering it, after all.

“I did, didn’t I? Well, either way, we should definitely discuss that more closely later in private. Yggdrasil and I would like to speak with you later. When it’s just three of us. If that’s possible, of course?” Nature’s Attendant asked, still being a bit overly polite in Jake’s opinion.

“Of course it is,” Jake smiled, also very relieved for now, knowing when he should hand over gifts.

What was perhaps a bit less relieving was the ever-growing amount of stares he got that had only increased in intensity more conversation had gone on. Some of them didn’t seem that nice, and Jake just hoped he wouldn’t come to regret this visit to Panon of Life.

Or, more accurately, that no one would try and make him regret his visit.

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Chapter 1092: Leaves

After Jake agreed to a private meeting, he could once more return to just being a background character as Duskleaf and Nature's Attendant kept speaking. Yggdrasil wasn't very active at all in conversation but did add a sentence here and re. From this brief meeting, Jake got feeling that while Yggdrasil was official leader of Panon of Life, Nature's Attendant was definitely one doing primary work of running it.

Luckily, this initial meeting wasn't very long, as it was only to greet one anor and do a small exchange. Duskleaf had brought a few gifts from Order of Malefic Viper, which were all resources in large quantities. From that, Jake also understood that flasks he'd been given by Villy weren't technically from Order but from Viper himself, which meant faction also had to bring some gifts.

It all mainly seemed symbolic as everything that was gifted could just have been traded for, but Jake didn't speak up but just enjoyed not having much attention on him. As initial meeting wound to an end, or gods present from Panon of Life were asked to act as escorts – no, not that kind - for those from Order of Malefic Viper during ir visit. A number of se gods also went off in a big group as y wanted to discuss a trade agreement or something. Jake honestly wasn't listening much to ir conversation as he was more focused on what he was to do next.

"Nimera, would you please escort Grand Elder to residence provided to him?" Nature's Attendant asked one of gods. "And if possible, could you remain here, Artemis? Seeing as you two encountered one anor within Nevermore, you can escort Chosen of Malefic Viper to his lodgings after we're done speaking with him."

Artemis and Godqueen named Nimera both nodded before this Godqueen approached Grand Elder. "Sir, if you would follow me."

"Of course," Duskleaf agreed as he threw a glance at Nature's Attendant. "Do also come by later, alright? I have some things I would like to discuss with you regarding you-know-what."

Nature's Attendant nodded with a serious look. "That was already plan."

Duskleaf and god named Nimera teleported away a moment later, leaving only five people remaining.

"How about me? Who's gonna escort me?" Minaga asked, looking around at wooden chamber that now only had himself, Jake, Artemis, Nature's Attendant, and Yggdrasil."

"We didn't know about your coming, so we hadn't summoned anyone to do so," Yggdrasil spoke. "But one should arrive shortly. In meantime, you can stay here with Artemis as we discuss matters with Vilas' Chosen."

"Alright, I guess I can wait a bit," Minaga said, throwing a look toward Artemis. Jake responded by glaring at Minaga, who just gave a cheeky smile in response, making it clear he was planning to do something.

"Great," Nature's Attendant nodded before turning to Jake. "Now, if you will come with us. You are okay with entering true domain of Mor Tree, right?"

"Sure," Jake agreed, just guessing that this true domain was crown of Yggdrasil. He'd been wanting to go re anyway after seeing it, so getting invited was awesome. Plus, he seriously doubted any of se gods had any malicious intent because if y did, he would already be long dead.

"n allow me to take you," Nature's Attendant said as he lifted his hand. Jake felt space magic begin around him, at a level where if he resisted, it would fail. He naturally didn't but allowed himself to be affected, and in very next second, he disappeared from Yggdrasil's trunk and appeared within her crown.

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Within trunk, Nature's Attendant also teleported out as Yggdrasil's dryad body rapidly wired and disappeared, leaving only a pair of gods re.

"Well, it seems like it's just two of us left," Minaga said with a big smile. He also subtly created an isolation barrier that would even block out Yggdrasil should she try to listen in despite conversation happening within her trunk.

"So it seems," Artemis acknowledged.

"You're one assigned to escort Jake after he's back, huh..." Minaga continued.

"That is what I was told to do, yes," Artemis once more answered shortly. Follow current novels on **novel•fire●net**

"Cool, cool, cool," Minaga nodded. "And do you plan on leaving his lodgings again after escorting him re?"

"I assume he will need to know some basic knowledge about Panon of Life, and I may as well provide it," wood elf goddess said.

"Yeah, does seem like a good idea to talk a bit," Minaga agreed.

Artemis sighed as she looked at All-God Legion. "Can you just come out and ask me already?"

"Will you answer me? How about this, I'll leave you be and maybe even give you a little trinket if you agree to answer five small questions of mine," Minaga proposed.

"One question," Artemis said shortly.

"Four."

"Two."

"And we meet in middle with three," Minaga grinned. "Which was my plan from very beginning."

Artemis didn't bother commenting as she sighed again. "Ask away, but you need to guarantee I get something out of having you pry in my social life. And it can't just be some useless thing."

"Alright, promise," Minaga said, clearly pleased with himself. "First question... on a scale of one to ten, how likely are you to kill Jake over what happened in Nevermore? Ten being him definitely not surviving his escort to his lodgings."

"Zero. One if that's not an option," Artemis answered without any hesitation.

"... I would have liked for you to expand your answer a little more, but me asking you to elaborate would definitely count as a second question, so I'm not gonna do that," Minaga said as he seemed in thought for a moment.

"Second question. Do you hold any resentment towards either your image or Jake's actions during Colosseum of Mortals?"

"No," Artemis once more answered, though she was being nice to Minaga by elaborating at least a little. "He did nothing wrong, and I can only guess that if I had been in same position as my image, I would have acted very similarly, if not identical."

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"I see, I see," Minaga nodded. "I will also take that as confirmation that you don't plan on filing any official complaint against Nevermore. Would make us look bad and make it harder to get images of gods for future."

"That was not a question," Artemis pointed out.

"Oh, I know," Minaga smiled, seemingly in thought once more. "Okay, final question... what would you want first? A boy or a girl?"

"I do not have any preference toward meat I eat," Artemis answered final question.

"You know that wasn't what I was asking about!" Minaga protested.

"I don't know that. I can infer that, but it was also entirely possible my interpretation of your question was correct," Artemis said, feeling as if she'd gotten one over Unique Lifeform.

However, Minaga still smiled. "You avoided answering my question, though... which means you at least considered what I asked."

"Truthfully, I did not," Artemis shook her head. "It isn't something I would have an opinion on, as I would always leave something like that to nature."

"Wow... are you-"

"You're out of questions," Artemis cut him off. "And now you owe me something for prying."

"... fine, but you better talk fondly of your great friend Minaga from here on out with all who ask," Unique Lifeform said as he opened his inventory to search it. "And you're damn lucky this was me I used to explore Emerald Forest..."

Jake opened his eyes to an all-new environment, both visually and energy-wise. Beforehand, when Jake had been within trunk of Yggdrasil, mana in air was still primarily environmental mana, even if Yggdrasil was one who controlled it.

However, now, Jake instantly felt that all mana around him had a clear owner. To even call it environmental mana wasn't even accurate anymore, as all of it belonged to being who'd created world he now found himself in.

Glancing around, he saw y were atop a grand, lush mountain with massive forests in all directions. Looking up, Jake didn't see night sky but what looked like a cover of faintly glowing leaves that extended endlessly in all directions, encompassing everything.

"Welcome to my divine realm," a voice echoed as a person with exact same mana signature as environment manifested beside him. He turned and saw Yggdrasil, who looked quite a bit different now than before. She still resembled a dryad, but she looked a lot more flesh and blood now than before, even if Jake knew she wasn't.

"It's definitely a lot more interesting than Viper's," Jake commented right as Nature's Attendant also teleported over. When he did, Jake realized something. Nature's Attendant that he had met outside had only been a clone, and now he very strongly suspected this was real one because aura of this version of him felt a lot stronger.

Nature's Attendant noticed Jake's gaze as he chuckled and turned to Yggdrasil. "I told you he could tell."

"You did," Yggdrasil answered, her mouth not even moving, yet her words appeared all around Jake. **"Tell me, Vilas' Chosen, what are you feeling right now? What has changed?"**

Jake wasn't sure if he was being tested or something, but either way, he decided to just be honest as he shrugged. "Well, obviously, environment feels quite a bit different compared to before. It's all your mana. As for Nature's Attendant, that's a different version of him than the one outside, and as this one feels stronger, I assume it may be his true body. As for what I'm feeling... nothing in particular. Except that it would be very annoying to fight anything here."

"What do you think he is to fight?" Primordial continued asking.

"There are a lot of C-grades in the forest below, and in that direction, I can detect some B-grades, too," Jake said as he motioned toward the north. "I should avoid the southern region, though... pretty sure there's a way too powerful B-grade somewhere there."

"Fascinating. You do indeed have powerful senses... perhaps that explains how you've managed so far," Yggdrasil continued. **"I have wondered how a creature such as you can even survive, but it appears your survival instinct and danger sense allow you to choose risks wisely."**

"You brought me here to study who I am?" Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I will admit there is some curiosity," Nature's Attendant said with a smile. "Though I will say it's partly your fault. You do continue to surprise, sparking intrigue even now. You say that the body before you is the real one, while the one you met outside wasn't. I believe that out of everyone there, besides Yggdrasil herself, you would be the only one able to tell the difference."

"I'm not gonna deny I have good senses," Jake said, wondering if perhaps he'd revealed too much. He reckoned that by now, the two in front of him had to have some level of understanding about Jake. While he did trust Dina, he definitely assumed she would answer any questions from her family members and leader of her faction, so through her, they should already know everything he had revealed, at least for the most part.

He was again, seeing was believing.

"More than good, I would say," Nature's Attendant chuckled. "Do say, what do you think of this world? What can you tell me about it?"

Jake took a moment to once more stare out at the infinitely expanding forest as he wondered out loud. "We're not on anything resembling a planet... I would assume it's

more like a flat plane. Moreover, while mana here is strong, it's definitely not to level I would expect it to be within divine realm of a god, much less a Primordial's, making it evident at least this area had its energy intensity and quantity reduced. Likely with intent of allowing C and B-grade monsters to live here."

"Good insight," Yggdrasil commented. **"Has Vilas ever spoken of my divine realm?"**

"Never," Jake shook his head. "Also, this is only second time I've ever been in a divine realm... well, unless you count Nevermore, I guess."

"I see. Are you interested in how mine works?" she asked. Jake found line of questioning a bit odd, and while he assumed she was trying to lead conversation somewhere, he wasn't sure what she wanted to get to. As for seeing more about divine realms...

"That would be awesome," Jake wholeheartedly agreed. He'd already borderline concluded that divine realms and Soulspaces were more or less same in principle, so learning more about divine realms could only be a good thing considering his own Soulspace progress.

Yggdrasil waved her hand at his positive response as area all around m was suddenly filled with leaves. All of m had faint transparent bubbles covering m, and when he glanced around, he saw what looked like clouds hanging over some of se small leaves, making him frown.

One particular leaf amongst tens of thousands caught his attention more than any or. Jake couldn't help but walk closer as he bent over and looked at its surface extremely closely. re, in middle of it, he saw what looked like a very faint pimple when he squinted... which was when he realized.

"We're on this leaf," Jake muttered as he leaned back and looked at all leaves around m. leaf he identified m being on was one of smallest ones, with or leaves several times larger floating primarily in air above. If all of se leaves had huge planes of life like one who was currently on... this divine realm was utterly massive.

"How many leaves are re in total?" Jake asked. Sure, he could count ones summoned, but he had a feeling re were more than currently shown.

"You can see for yourself," she answered and waved her hand again, and Jake's eyes opened wide in very next moment.

Leaves covered his vision, bathing entire mountain and sky above surrounding forest. Jake wasn't even foolish enough to try and count m because even when he released a Pulse of Perception that covered more than three hundred kilometers in all directions... he still only saw leaves everywhere.

He could only stare as he wondered out loud: “Just how many creatures live within here? How strong are y? Are y born here?”

“This is a world of life,” Nature’s Attendant answered with a smile. “As for how strong... re are many gods living within here. Some of m are even natives of this world, having been born and ascended without knowing about multiverse’s existence before achieving godhood. Mind you, we do not try to keep it a secret, but neir do we wish to interfere with those who live here as long as it can be avoided.”

Jake was astonished at sheer scope of things as he muttered. “This is practically an entirely new universe.”

“Not yet,” Yggdrasil answered. **“Though one day, it shall truly rival one.”**

At that moment, Jake was once more reminded just how powerful Primordials truly were. He met and talked to m like people, but during encounters like se, he understood just how unfathomable y were compared to him. He began to better understand why so many beings in multiverse worshipped m as utterly supreme and unapproachable beings.

But more than anything... thought of such beings existing in multiverse couldn’t help but get him excited. Excited just how far away horizon truly was, Jake not once doubting it would one day be within his arrow’s reach.

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- Chapter 1093: Divine Gift Exchange

Chapter 1093: Divine Gift Exchange

Yggdrasil dispelled many leaves again after a few seconds of giving Jake time to be in awe. He had a lot of questions, and he couldn’t hold back but at least ask some of m.

“This space is bigger than it looks from outside, right?” Jake asked. Sure, Yggdrasil was already massive from outside, but he still didn’t believe this many leaf continents – something he’d just decided now to call m - could fit inside.

“My realm is expanded, yes,” Yggdrasil answered. **“And should one pass boundary through force, y shall not find mselves in multiverse outside but void between universes.”**

“Does that mean this space technically exists within void?” Jake asked curiously.

“In some sense, all of existence lies within void,” Yggdrasil said, not seeming in a mood to elaborate further on that point.

“You know, it’s quite rare we have guests within here,” Nature’s Attendant jumped into conversation as he entirely changed topic. “Will you allow me to be straightforward with you for a moment?”

Jake assumed it was a rhetorical question at first, but god was looking at Jake as if he genuinely wanted an answer, making Jake nod in response. Google search
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“Thank you,” Nature’s Attendant began with a smile. “Seeing as this world is also Yggdrasil’s Divine Realm, visiting gods want to avoid it at all cost. As you no doubt know, a god is far more powerful within its own realm, and Yggdrasil is no different. Even the Primordials would find themselves threatened within here, and while you could perhaps escape, it wouldn’t be without paying a large price. Hence, you prefer to meet on neutral ground or would only ever send a weak avatar.”

All of this was something Jake could have easily guessed as he nodded along, still unsure what god was getting at.

“Meanwhile, weaker gods who are willing to go here often cannot handle pressure,” god continued. “I asked you before if you felt it, yet you didn’t even point out the difference in aura displayed by Yggdrasil before and after we entered her realm. Why didn’t you?”

“I thought it was evident,” Jake shrugged. “As you said, gods are way more powerful in their own Divine Realms, and I did mention that this entire place obviously belongs to the World Tree. I guess natives can handle energy, but with a direct manifestation of god who owns the realm, I can see even gods having a tough time.”

“You are entirely correct; it is indeed hard for me to handle, which is why we cannot have guests here for that exact reason. It wouldn’t be polite to invite me here knowing just what kind of pressure you would be put under, now would it?”

Jake was about to answer the question only for Nature’s Attendant to continue speaking as that one had apparently been rhetorical.

“Yet here you are. Unaffected and uninfluenced. Ah, yes, that is another thing I noticed with you... your lack of reverence is unnatural. Tell me, when you look at Yggdrasil, what do you see?” Nature Attendant asked.

“A powerful Primordial,” Jake said, remaining confused about what god was fishing for. “If you’re talking looks, well, an impressively large tree...”

Nature’s Attendant chuckled as even Yggdrasil smiled. “And that’s exactly it. You have a resistance to auras, but it’s intrinsically tied to a resistance toward the base instinct of

recognizing a superior creature. What's more, I'm unsure if this is actually an effect of your Bloodline or merely a side effect of it. If it's not, it would be difficult to explain what has happened to Dina."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked with a frown. He wasn't sure he liked this current line of questioning and wondered if playing ignorant could get him out of it. Probably not, but either way, he was interested in what had happened with Dina.

"Her aura resistance has grown to a level where it even surpasses some gods," Nature Attendant said, a hint of pride in his voice. "What's more, from conversations with her, I can see that her thoughts regarding gods have changed. No longer does she have same instinctive desire to worship as she did before Nevermore. Because we're family, she could already handle being around me, at least for most part, but being near Yggdrasil for extended periods would have been impossible for her. Yet just a month ago, Dina spent an entire week being personally tutored by her here on this very leaf in forest below. Did she still feel aura of Yggdrasil, and did it still pressure her somewhat? For sure, but she could handle it."

Jake simply nodded, having decided that ignorance wasn't gonna fly. Instead, he went with exact opposite. "Happy to hear that. We did spend a few decades in a party so it isn't exactly surprising that happened. Seems to be what commonly happens to those I spend a lot of time around."

"It does, doesn't it?" Nature's Attendant smiled. "She also opened up a lot more after coming back, which brings me to reason why I summoned you here in first place. I promised you a reward for helping her with Nevermore, and you certainly exceeded all expectations in that regard. Her progress was extraordinary. But perhaps more important to be me as her grandfar, you helped her develop as a person. For that, you have my genuine gratitude."

"So, full transparency, I'm pretty sure Sword Saint is responsible for that far more so than me," Jake confessed.

"Oh, I'm fully aware, and he shall also be rewarded," Nature's Attendant chuckled. "But you are still reason why she went with him. Even if Dina has admittedly spoken a lot more about both him and Sylphie than you."

"Not exactly surprising," Jake shook his head. Dina and Sword Saint had gotten along a lot better than Jake and Dina, and as for Sylphie, well, everyone liked Sylphie. Well, except for those she went full murder-bird on, but that was more often than not her own fault. Shouldn't have owned something tasty Sylphie wanted to snack on.

He did wonder, though. "This may seem rude... but why all questions regarding my Bloodline? About me? I've had a hard time figuring out what you two are trying to discover."

Perhaps he was being a bit too blunt just asking me outright, but Jake had never been good at subtlety outside of using his stealth skills.

“What makes you think we are aiming to discover anything?” Yggdrasil asked.

“See, here it is again,” Jake pointed out. “You answer with another question rather than, you know, actually answer. You’re clearly not asking for fun, and I have a hard time seeing why two of you would care for my opinion on your Divine Realm.”

“Yet that is exactly why we ask,” Yggdrasil finally gave a straight answer. **“Your perspective holds value you do not quite comprehend. You are a mortal who does not experience suppression of divinity. A man guided by instinct over logic and a type of creature that has never stepped foot within this realm before. This uniqueness makes you intriguing and a curiosity to those who rarely experience novelty of interacting with anything genuinely new.”**

“I’m not quite sure how to take that,” Jake mumbled. Luckily, Nature’s Attendant stepped in quickly.

“Just be aware we have no ill intentions. We invited you here, after all. We do not demand anything from you, and if you are uncomfortable with our prying, we will gladly stop. I didn’t bring you here for an interrogation but to reward you, after all,” old god spoke with a comforting smile.

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“Oh, that reminds me,” Jake suddenly remembered. “Viper had me bring two personal gifts personally from him for two of you. I would love to tell you what it is, but I genuinely can’t tell.”

“Are these gifts in your current spatial storage?” Nature’s Attendant asked with concern.

“Yeah?” Jake confirmed, unsure what caution was all about.

After his positive repose, Yggdrasil responded by summoning a powerful barrier that covered the entire mountain they were on. Jake also vaguely felt something else change, and when he used a few Pulses in quick succession, he noticed that nothing outside the barrier was moving, as if time had stopped.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out why Yggdrasil had done that.

“Now that is a little hurtful, isn’t it?” Jake asked jokingly.

“Seeing as I’m unaware of this gift’s nature, I prefer caution. A powerful unknown poison or perhaps even a plague could cause a lot of unwanted damage that I would much prefer to do without,” Yggdrasil answered, not a hint of jest in her voice.

Jake glanced at Nature's Attendant, who had same serious expression, and Jake couldn't help but mutter out loud. "Has he seriously done something like that in past?"

two gods in front of him didn't answer as Jake shook his head. *Man, Villy, you really have been an asshole at times, huh?*

"Look, I don't think it's anything bad, but sure, do be cautious," Jake said, as he didn't see any reason to keep m all in suspense anymore. Waving his hand, two flasks appeared, with gods staring cautiously at m for a moment. However, quickly, y realized that Jake hadn't been carrying some plague in a bottle as both motioned for flasks to fly over to each of m respectively.

"You said you aren't sure what it is?" Nature's Attendant asked. "se are some pretty hefty seals..."

"From what Viper told me, he brought out some of his good stuff," Jake tried to assure two of m.

Yggdrasil was first to remove seal on her flask, and moment she did, her demeanor changed. Nature's Attendant noticed her change and also unsealed his own flask, doing a worse job at hiding his surprise than Primordial.

"This is... hm," he said with a frown.

"Is re a problem?" Jake asked, now feeling a bit nervous that Villy had just been messing with three of m. *I fucking swear, if he just had me hand over two bottles of tap water or some shit like that, I'm gonna punch him in nose next time we meet up.*

"A problem? Quite opposite," Nature's Attendant said as he looked at Yggdrasil, who also frowned. "This was very purposeful, wasn't it?"

"**Yes,**" Yggdrasil confirmed.

Jake fell very much in dark, but once more, Nature's Attendant came to rescue. "I cannot share with you exactly what se flasks contain, but I will share with you intent behind m. This is a statement, nay, a declaration."

"A declaration of what?" Jake asked, confused.

"That he's still best alchemist in multiverse," Yggdrasil answered. **"Despite eras, he clearly never stopped honing his craft. No one has seen any creations by him similar to se since seventh era, making many doubt if he was still as skilled as he used to be. Alchemy has gotten far more complex and powerful as general power level of multiverse has grown in tandem with ever-increasing influx of Records, and no one could be sure if he had kept up. Most of best alchemists learn through sparring with one anor and exchanging knowledge... but n again, that**

was never something Vilas bored much with. He always viewed all or alchemists as beneath him. I don't think he's ever encountered a single alchemist he even considered worth learning from."

Well, Jake knew one exception to that statement, but if he only considered now-living alchemists, she was probably right. Even Duskleaf, who was clearly recognized as an alchemist at absolute top of multiverse, was excited whenever he could convince Villy to give him pointers.

"Guess I chose a good Patron for my profession," Jake smiled as he tried to crack a small joke again.

Nature's Attendant chuckled again and shook his head. "Once more, you seem to not understand how odd that sentence is. As a Chosen, you view your Patron as only Patron of your alchemical Path."

"Yeah," Jake just agreed with a cheeky smile. "Snakes don't even have hands; what does he know about archery?"

two of m luckily found Jake's joking amusing; at least, neir of m said anything negative. Jake also got vibes that despite talking with him, two were also having private telepathic discussions, likely regarding gifts y had just received from Viper.

Perhaps y even wanted Jake gone so y could properly inspect items. At least, he got that feeling as y pushed conversation forward. "Now, we shouldn't keep Artemis waiting for too long, now should we? You have given us gifts, but we are unsure what you would want in return. I have some ideas in mind, but do you have any requests?"

Finally y were on to that topic, and Jake was happy that Yggdrasil was also present for what he was about to say next.

"You know all members who were in our Nevermore party, right?" Jake asked.

"Yes, of course," Nature's Attendant answered, unsure what Jake was getting at. That was also when Jake realized that y likely didn't know.

"During system event... a False God appeared. One who could manipulate and use desolation," Jake said, two gods getting serious when Jake said this. "Fallen King and Sylphie encountered this False God... but Fallen King didn't make it."

"I... didn't know that," Nature's Attendant sighed. "How long ago did it happen, and-"

"Unique Lifeform is not dead," Yggdrasil spoke, getting Jake's attention. "I can still feel his presence within mask you wear. energy of life is faint to level of being near-undetectable, but it's re."

“Yeah, I did kind of know that,” Jake nodded. “And that’s related to my request. While I could maybe find a solution myself if given enough time, I don’t want to wait. He’s already missing out enough as is.”

Jake was arrogant, yes. He did truly believe he could find a method himself some day. However, for once, he wasn’t selfish enough to wait. Jake didn’t like asking for help, and if Yggdrasil and Nature’s Attendant offered to heal Jake’s own injured soul, he would have likely rejected it, but this wasn’t about him. He wasn’t willing to ask for help for himself, but if it was to help someone he considered a friend, he was more than willing.

“I also have this,” Jake added as he summoned a fragment. “This is an item I got after death of False God who originally slew Fallen King.”

[Fragment of Fallen King (Legendary)] – A single fragment and all that remains of what had once been Unique Lifeform known as Fallen King. Records and energy of Fallen King remain within, granting this fragment incredible durability and ability to enhance certain soul-related abilities when used as a catalyst. Has many alchemical uses, especially when used in any soul-related creations. WARNING: Unknown energies linger within that may lead to unforeseen effects upon use.

Nature’s Attendant looked at fragment closely, Yggdrasil did same before she spoke. **“You wish for us to heal this Unique Lifeform?”**

“If possible, yes,” Jake nodded.

“That’s not an easy matter,” Nature’s Attendant sighed. “We’re talking about a Unique Lifeform. Its bodies and souls are incredibly complex, and-“

“We accept,” Yggdrasil agreed. “But do consider what else you would want in addition. Usually, it’s true that rebuilding body and soul of a Unique Lifeform is as difficult, if not more so, than a revival, but this Fallen King has already laid groundwork. That fragment is a blueprint of his body, and within your mask, his Truesoul lingers.”

Jake couldn’t help but smile as he heard this. “Does that mean that his memories will be intact?”

This was thing Jake had feared most. Rebuilding body of Fallen King wasn’t what he thought was difficult; it was rebuilding Unique Lifeform he knew as Fallen King. If all he did was create an entirely “new” Unique Lifeform, what even was point?

“A sealed package of pure soul energy sits within your mask. Tell me, did he transfer something to it shortly before his near-death?” Yggdrasil asked.

Jake thought back before nodding. "Yeah... some energy entered it shortly before he went to try and take down False God..."

"Likely a copy of his memories," Yggdrasil said. "Give me your mask and fragment. Reconstruction will take a while, but I do not believe you are in a rush right now."

"Alright," Jake readily agreed as he took off his mask and presented it. Energy gared around mask as Yggdrasil seemed to scan it from top to bottom.

"Intriguing indeed..." Yggdrasil spoke again. "Take back mask for now. You will be called upon when your presence is needed again."

Jake wasn't even sure what Yggdrasil had done to mask, but fragment was gone, and he could only believe in Primordial for now.

"Alright," he nodded solemnly.

"With that, it's time for you to return to Artemis," Nature's Attendant said with a knowing smile. "I believe you two have quite a lot to discuss."

Before Jake even had time to agree, he was teleported out of Divine Realm and back into trunk, where he found himself standing in wooden chamber with only one or person present, Minaga evidently already gone.

Jake and Artemis momentarily locked eyes once more, and this time, neir broke contact as re was no longer an audience for m to care about.

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Chapter 1094: Nervousness

Jake was definitely nervous as he finally found himself alone facing Artemis. It wasn't nerves born of fear, but a mix of anticipation and hope that everything would go as he'd wished.

So far, Jake still didn't have full knowledge of how Artemis felt about everything. At most, he could make educated guesses based on how she and everyone else acted. If Nature's Attendant and Yggdrasil believed she had any desire to end his existence, he really hoped y wouldn't have assigned her to escort him.

On the other hand, it was also possible that they did this so that two of them could squash any positive relationship between them. While it was true that relationships between S-grades and gods were considered pretty normal in the multiverse, even A-grades and gods getting together was insanely rare. B-grades? Jake had never even heard of it happening outside of some of the times gods decided to impersonate mortals.

All of this is to say that Jake had no idea if a god would even consider a C-grade. They were, objectively speaking, superior beings to mortals. Jake knew that Villy didn't even consider an average mortal a person. Their lives were too fleeting, too meaningless, for him to give even an iota of thought or care towards them. In his eyes, if they died due to getting killed by something or of natural causes, it didn't matter, as their lives were so short anyway.

Jake even knew that Villy didn't have the most extreme opinion. Some creatures born naturally at high grades didn't view anything below what their young were born at as creatures worth considering. They were nothing more than insects to an average human pre-system. This opinion some gods held of mortals... that mortals were all merely insects.

Naturally, Jake didn't expect this of Artemis, but if she had even the slightest thought that Jake was fundamentally an inferior being, that would be the biggest turn-off in the world for both sides and effectively the end of anything positively developing between them.

Finally, as a god, there was a big difference in power that none of them could deny. A far larger one than with anyone else Jake had ever been with. Sure, Carmen was strong, but she wasn't "I could kill you with a thought"-strong.

In summary, Jake had many reasons to be nervous, and he didn't speak up right away because he couldn't help but wonder what Artemis was thinking about all this. He wondered if she thought Jake's relative weakness wasn't an absolute turn-off because if she did... yeah, that would suck.

--

Artemis had experienced more emotions of nervousness in the last few years than she had in an entire era before that. Usually, when planning to fight something powerful, all she felt was excitement, yet the mortal in front of her was more nerve-wracking than even Godking monsters she'd hunted down.

She couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. Artemis was used to interacting with mortals, and they all had the same thing in common: innate fear and respect. It was something they couldn't help themselves with. It was a natural response, no different than someone being forced to close their eyes when faced with a powerful light. Even if they tried to resist with every fiber of their being, they didn't stand a chance.

The particular mortal in front of her was said to be immune to this sort of thing, yet a small sliver of doubt still wormed its way into Artemis' mind. She knew her image in Nevermore had a very positive relationship with him, but that had happened under very

specific circumstances. One where y were of equal standing and power, both lowly mortals, at least in body.

Things were vastly different now. She recognized gap and power, and while she would be lying if she said she didn't personally view it as an issue, in her mind, it was a temporary one. Artemis had lived for a long time, so for her to wait a thousand or even a million years for something wasn't really a problem. It was one intense meditation session at most, and she'd spent longer working on upgrading skills in past.

As a mortal, Jake's perception of time was vastly different. Based on what she understood, he'd been alive a couple of hundred years at most, and that was factoring in time spent training with time dilation.

Concepts such as age difference weren't really a thing that gods even thought out normally. An S-grade had already lived for a very long time, to point where neir party cared. Between gods, level of care was even less. In grand scheme of things, difference between a million and a billion years of life was just meaningless when it came to considering maturity.

Artemis couldn't help but consider it in this instance, though. Compared to him, she was positively ancient, and even if he could ignore her presence, he had to know that. He was also young enough for it to potentially even be an issue in his mind.

more Artemis thought about things, more reasons she found not to pursue anything... and more she felt nervous that Jake had similar thoughts and concerns.

Because despite everything, when Artemis looked into Jake's eyes, and when she remembered him in Nevermore as he'd stood before Valdemar, she couldn't help but feel a shiver run down her back... and if that wasn't a green flag and a massive turn-on, she didn't know what was.

Jake decided to just bite bullet and take initiative as he cleared his throat. "So... it's been a while. Well, probably not to you, but from my perspective, it has been a little bit."

Alright, he definitely screwed that one up. As a god, time Jake spent doing Prima Event and all that shit had to have felt like blink of an eye. Luckily, she responded in a somewhat neutral fashion.

"It has, and I've heard you've been quite busy during this time," Artemis spoke, and from Jake's perspective, clearly wasn't nervous at all. "You killed Usurper of Yip of Yore and, after that, got into conflict with Holy Church. Hopefully, that situation won't escalate more than it needs to."

Jake couldn't help but be at least a little happy knowing that Artemis had kept up with what Jake had been doing since Nevermore. Even happier as he detected a hint of concern when she spoke about his conflict with Holy Church. Sure, it was possible her

concern was with many weak mortals who could be caught in crossfire should things escalate, but Jake chose to interpret it as her being nervous about him.

“Yeah, things have been hectic,” Jake agreed. “Regarding Holy Church, matters are kind of complicated. It’s only a schism of Holy Church that acted against me, with Holy Mor herself seemingly not that involved. I’m not exactly sure which part of Holy Church wanted Truesoul, but I do know Lodestar Matron was one of its leaders, if not main one behind scheme.”

“Oh?” Artemis responded with some genuine interest. “What’s this about a Truesoul and Lodestar Matron? I have a hard time imagining someone of her status wanting a Truesoul... unless...”

“Ell’Hakan,” Jake commented, Artemis frowning.

“Did Holy Church attempt to steal your rightful bounty after you defeated Usurper? That’s rare audacious,” Artemis said, clearly offended by concept itself. “Even if you didn’t have any uses for Truesoul, it wasn’t its to take.”

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“Of that, we’re in complete agreement, and it did eventually end with me getting Truesoul back and forcefully dispersing it, fully completing hunt,” Jake nodded. “As for how I know Lodestar Matron was behind it, well, I had a small meeting with her regarding matter. It didn’t end that well.”

“You spoke directly with Lodestar Matron?” Artemis asked with surprise.

Jake nodded, not really seeing it as a big deal. “I do know she’s kind of a big deal, and I get feeling I spoke to her directly, likely in an attempt to intimidate me on its part. Needless to say, that didn’t work out well for Holy Church. Either way, I don’t know if there will be future trouble with me, but I would be surprised if there wasn’t.”

“You don’t seem very disturbed at notion?”

“Why would I be?” Jake smiled. “I’m already not a fan of faction and how you operate, so if you want to offer me enemies for target practice, I’ll welcome it. Not to say I would be that disappointed if you just let sleeping dogs lie and moved on from its loss in my galaxy.”

Artemis nodded, looking to be in thought for a moment. Jake wasn’t gonna lie; he had mainly just been saying all that to feel as if he had something to talk about. Seeing as Artemis kept asking questions, he reckoned topic did interest her at least somewhat. Gossip involving top gods of multiverse had to be intriguing for most gods, right?

"Let's hope y don't go overboard in ir response," Artemis said in agreement after a few seconds. "Now, let's get to your assigned residence. From what I've seen, it's pretty nice with a good alchemy lab attached and some high-level study material you shouldn't be able to find in Order."

"Sounds like a nice place," Jake nodded. "How will we get re? Just a teleport, or?"

"How would you like to go re?" Artemis asked. "We could just teleport, or we could fly re, and I can get you more acquainted with city surrounding trunk and roots of Mor Tree."

"Flying sounds good," Jake instantly agreed, gladly taking chance to spend some more time with her. "Also, I do find it a bit entertaining you call it a city, considering just how utterly humongous it is. I thought city at Order of Malefic Viper was large, but this place is just... silly big."

"I guess by your standards, it is huge," Artemis commented. "However, compared to some of cities in Altmar Empire or Holy Church, it's not that impressive, at least not from a pure size and population point of view."

"Well, I can't exactly comment as I've never been in Altmar Empire or Holy Church territory, but I still think this is plenty huge," Jake shrugged. "Any idea how many people live here?"

"No idea," Artemis shrugged as she motioned for him to follow. "I don't think anyone knows. Too many to count is right answer."

"Makes sense," Jake muttered as he went after Artemis, who walked toward a flat part of wall in wooden chamber. When she touched it, it looked as if wood opened up, revealing outside world... but seeing as Jake could clearly feel that y were inside trunk with wood on all sides furr than his Pulse could detect, some magic was definitely going on to make that portal.

Once outside, Artemis took out what looked like a whistle and put it in her mouth. To Jake's senses, no sound was produced even when Artemis blew, yet at very next second, a giant creature filled his vision as it appeared.

With a huge beast in front of him and a trunk that formed what looked like an entirely flat wall endlessly behind him, Jake truly felt scope of things. Looking up at beast, Jake saw a giant bird-like creature without any wings and an extremely elongated body with a beak nearly same length as rest of its body. It looked like a massive lance from Jake's point of view. It honestly looked a bit like a feared missile or blowdart projectile, just one without fletched endings.

Size-wise, beast had to be at least a few kilometers long, but after using Identify, he felt pretty damn certain it could decide its own size at any point.

[Divine Voidpiercer Empress – lvl ?]

As he looked at divine beast, divine beast also observed him back. It didn't speak to him. Instead, Artemis introduced m.

"Vitesse, this is Chosen of Malefic Viper I mentioned to you before," Artemis said to beast before turning to Jake. "And this here is Vitesse. She is a natural-born divine beast right here from this Great Planet."

"Pleased to meet you," Jake nodded in greeting. In response, big creature just let out a loud humming noise before going quiet.

"Vitesse can't speak, and while she does know telepathy, she rarely ever uses it," Artemis explained. "Now come, building is on her back."

Jake followed Artemis as she flew up toward top of god-tier beast. Up re, Jake saw that in between fears, what looked like a small dome was embedded into beast's body. It was only about twenty centimeters across, and Jake questioned what it was until Artemis raised a hand. "Don't resist."

Doing as told, Jake allowed himself to be teleported, and a moment later, he found himself within a large dome of glass. At least it looked that way, but as he looked outside, he realized y were within that small dome on beast's back. Updates are released by novel~fire~net

"Vitesse and I are old friends. I defeated her during a hunt a few eras ago as she was causing ravage, but I chose to spare her after she offered to instead serve Panon of Life," Artemis explained. "It was only meant to be temporary, but she stayed around after that and insisted on being my mount, and seeing as it's rar convenient, I didn't reject her."

"Nice ride, indeed," Jake commented. "As she's called a Voidpiercer, does that mean she can actually pierce void?"

"When I hunted her down, we did so across twenty-two different universes and even more minor worlds spread throughout void," Artemis said with a smile as if recalling a pleasant memory. "Took me over a year before I finally caught her for good."

"Damn," Jake muttered. "Sounds like you have a lot of great stories to tell."

"Such things come with a long life," Artemis nodded. "Oh, and in case you're wondering, no one can listen in or observe us while within this place. Not even Vitesse."

"I know," Jake said, already able to tell that no one else was observing m. Jake couldn't tell if Villy would also have been cut off as god had stopped observing him when he got

really close to Yggdrasil, making Jake assume he eir couldn't with anor Primordial so close, or he'd stopped out of respect as she could likely detect him doing so.

As for why he told Artemis, he knew no one was observing him... well, he didn't really feel like keeping any secrets from her, at least not ones like that. If y were to spend time toger, he at least wanted her to know a bit about himself and his abilities. He was still going to keep some secrets, but he felt more prone to sharing when it came to her.

"I want to ask how you know, but I guess that can wait for later," Artemis said as she turned more serious. "Seeing as we're away from prying eyes of everyone else, I believe it's time we had a proper discussion."

Finally, moment had come. Jake had kind of hoped y could have continued to just speak casually while ignoring elephant in room, but he knew it had to happen. He just hoped that she wasn't going to outright tell him to forget everything that happened in Nevermore and-

"Allow me to start. I have no regrets about anything that happened in Nevermore, and going on advice of my or self and my unquestionable attraction toward you, I'm open to exploring matter furr," Artemis said in a very matter-of-fact kind of way.

Jake just stared at her for a moment, taking a bit to process what she'd said. More than a full second ticked by with Jake not saying anything, and he was only shaken back to reality when he saw something he hadn't expected from god... nervousness. She had been hiding it well, but his silence had allowed it to surface, and he couldn't help but smile at notion of a god being nervous after saying something like that.

"Likewise," Jake simply answered with a smile. "Especially attraction part."

Artemis looked surprised at his answer for a moment before letting out a sigh of relief. "Goodness... now I feel bad for all people I rejected in past because I would have felt horrible if you'd outright rejected me, much less made a scornful face while letting out a disgusted voice."

"Ouch, yeah, that would be a bad way to let someone down," Jake said, unable to hold back a chuckle.

Artemis looked at him and returned his smile. "I do want to make one thing clear, though. In Nevermore, I – that is to say, my image – was heavily limited in time, which undoubtedly influenced my approach re significantly. Out here in real multiverse, re are no such time constraints."

"I get it," Jake nodded. "We're not in a rush."

“Good that we’re in agreement,” Artemis said, once more looking relieved. “Also, while I did use city tour as an excuse to get you in here and alone, I do reckon I owe you one, assuming you’re still interested.”

“Sure, I reckon I’ll spend some time here, so a city tour would be awesome,” Jake said, genuinely interested in knowing more about what he could only assume was effectively capital of Panon of Life.

Artemis nodded, and a moment later, world began to move outside of glass bubble as Voidpiercer began to fly. re was still some awkwardness left between two people in room, but nervousness that both had felt only a short while ago quickly disappeared as y now knew how or party felt.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 1095: Beauty & Brain

Jake had been right in many of his assumptions regarding Panon of Life. information he’d read during voyage re had also been confirmed continually as Jake got a tour of what he mentally called capital city of Panon of Life.

He also learned a lot about people who lived re. Most factions in multiverse had some kind of bias or leaned toward certain races more than ors, often because of who leader of faction was. Even somewhere like Order of Malefic Viper, where merit was number one determinant of how much status one could get, re was still a massive overrepresentation of scalekin compared to any or archetype of race.

It wasn’t even necessary to mention factions like Altmar Empire, which consisted nearly entirely of elves, and Valhal, which was predominately human due to Valdemar. One could argue Holy Church was most diverse of all factions, but even y heavily leaned toward enlightened species. Sure, monsters with human form could join m, but such a thing was rare compared to somewhere like Order of Malefic Viper, where Jake got vibes that re were more monsters than enlightened around.

However, Panon of Life struck Jake as truly diverse, more than any or faction Jake had encountered before. y were definitely faction with most plant-like lifeforms, but seeing as such beings with developed sapience were rare, y didn’t represent a large part of Panon’s members.

When it came to enlightenment, y had slightly more elves than humans, with plenty of both races overall. re were more beastfolk than both of those, though, and Jake even saw his fair share of demons around, as well as so many or races he rarely saw.

When it came to monsters, those were also everywhere, including a lot of powerful beasts. As Panon of Life actively cultivated biomes and natural environments, re lived a lot of powerful beasts among m, many also at level of gods. Seeing as monsters usually didn't have same instinct as enlightened to band toger, it was rare to see that many gared in one place without constant fighting breaking out... but let's just say that living on and surrounding roots of a giant World Tree had quite calming effect.

only thing that one couldn't find in Panon of Life was undead, as ir Path and very concept of life didn't mesh very well, so that was only to be expected. Technology also wasn't a massive aspect of faction, meaning Automata didn't have a presence eir. In fact, Panon of Life, in general, weren't fans of Automata due to ir pursuit and creation of syntic life, something Panon viewed as unnatural.

Artemis explained all of this as she took Jake through city within Divine Voidpiercer, bird-like creature moving so fast at times it was practically teleportation in Jake's mind. y visited a lot of important landmarks of massive city, and soon, y found mselves at a large root of Yggdrasil that was hollowed out in places, creating caves. With help of Artemis, Jake could see what was happening on root.

Jake saw hundreds of recognizable monsters, though y looked slightly different from what he was used to. ir bodies were larger than normal, ir general form bulkier, and ir scales all had a mixed color palette between brown and green.

"This is area given to Wildflight, one of Dragonflights," Artemis explained, adding a bit more context as she perhaps wasn't sure how much Jake knew about dragonkin.

That's right, he was looking at a group of dragons that certainly didn't give him vibe that y were monsters of magic. Based on Jake's understanding, all dragons were naturally gifted magic users who could perform freeform magic at an incredibly high level, and ir race gave m expansive mana pools. Pretty much, y were perfect mages among monster race, which was why having m all look like dragon versions of gym bros felt weird.

"You seem surprised?" Artemis said with a teasing smile. "I guess y do break your expectations of what dragons are supposed to be. Wildflight is kind of different from or Dragonflights in that y specialize in nature and life magic. However, seeing as dragons are also arrogant assholes by default, y found ir own unique way of applying ir magic. Rar than focus on healing, Wildflight developed a Path solely focused on refining mselves. y are still a species focused on magic, but all of this magic has been channeled into making ir bodies stronger, mana itself stored in ir muscles, bones, and flesh. y do also have some nature and healing magic, but when facing a dragon from Wildflight, what you need to be careful of isn't ir magic spells but ir claws and maws. Oh,

and ir Breath. Even if y give up most of ir magical abilities for physical prowess, y still have ir Dragon's Breath."

"y certainly do stand out compared to ors of ir race I've seen. I take it you've hunted down a lot of dragons throughout your life?" Jake asked hunter goddess.

"A few, but not many of Wildflight," Artemis said. "I was born into Panon of Life, and seeing as y've had a close relationship with Panon of Life since long before I was born, I very rarely found myself in conflict with m. No, type of dragon I've hunted down most is definitely those commonly found among Darkflight. Many of m delve into necromancy, and while Lumenflight does tend to keep m in check, re will always be rogue dragons out and about doing ir own thing, causing carnage."

"Do you have any recommendations?" Jake asked with a slightly cheeky smile.

Artemis took a moment before she understood. "You want to slay a True Dragon while still in C-grade?"

She didn't seem overly surprised, and Jake readily confirmed. "That's plan."

"Have you killed any B-grades yet?" Artemis questioned.

"None so far," Jake shook his head. "But I feel like I could. Maybe not a powerful variant, but I could definitely kill a low-level B-grade."

"I would also guess you could," Artemis nodded. "Of course, while I don't fully understand your Path, I assume you lean heavily into hunter archetype, and going by your personality, I take it you have a Big Game Hunter variant?"

"Right on money," Jake confirmed. "How about you?"

Artemis smiled. "What's fun in fighting weaker foes? I was and still am also a Big Game Hunter, and while that certainly does create some issues and can limit progress at times, I have no regrets. I do reckon my Path was quite a bit different from yours, though, as I did also heavily invest in nature magic."

"Oh, I remember," Jake chuckled. "Those arrows during Colosseum fights were nasty. I can't even begin to imagine what you were capable of when not limited to level 0."

"I could show you sometime," Artemis offered. "I still have a few recordings of my days back when I was a mortal. But, yeah, I also leaned heavily into making traps, stealth, and stalking down my foes while identifying weaknesses to exploit. I rarely fought anything without a lot of preparation beforehand."

"We're not that much different in that regard. Besides trap part," Jake said. "I've never been a big fan of using traps. I definitely see its value, but I prefer to take my foe entirely by surprise and hit them strong and hard before they even know they are under attack."

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"Both are definitely valid approaches. I often did the same, but I also prepared a web of traps between me and my foe to allow me to keep my distance," Artemis nodded.

"Contrary to you, I wasn't that skilled in melee combat, and I often found myself in trouble if my foe got too close, so I did a lot to make sure that didn't happen. Be that through vine arrows, traps, movement skills, or anything else I could do to slow down a pursuer while creating distance."

"Well, I can't really comment much on its efficiency, seeing as you made it to godhood," Jake said with a shrug. "Still not my Path, though."

"I know," Artemis nodded with a smile. "I do look forward to seeing if your archery has developed since you last parted with my image."

"Yeah, not gonna lie, I'm afraid I'll disappoint in that area," Jake confessed. "I've been distracted dealing with and working on a lot of other things, and I'm just gonna be fully transparent... I kind of got the feeling that there would be some archery training involved with my visit to Panon of Life. I do have very fond memories of last time I trained with a skilled hunter from Panon, after all."

"I think something can be arranged," Artemis smiled. "It'll also serve as a good excuse for why I interact with you. Mor Tree and Nature's Attendant already gave us an excuse by assigning me as your escort to your residence, so it will merely look like a natural extension of that if I begin to assist you in your training."

"Speaking of those two... do you know, you know?" Jake asked, a bit doubtful.

"Yes," Artemis outright confirmed.

"And what do you think about everything?" Jake asked, now back to being quite nervous. It felt as if he was asking what her parents were thinking, which probably wasn't that far off, considering Artemis had once been Chosen of Yggdrasil.

"I'm... unsure," Artemis confessed. "I don't think you're against anything, more like you're seeing how things develop before forming a full opinion. My guess is that both of them are curious and at least want to see something happen, if for nothing else but the novelty of the situation."

"I can totally see that," Jake said as he briefly told Artemis a bit about what had happened while inside Divine Realm of Yggdrasil. The hunter goddess curiously listened

without commenting until Jake was done, her attention definitely caught by one thing more than any or.

“You did just remind me... Malefic One,” Artemis said, concern marring her face. “I remember that in Nevermore, you told me that entire conflict between Valhal and Order was manufactured, and in full honesty, I had some doubt no matter how much I saw two Primordials interact in a friendly manner. Reason for my doubt came from my lack of belief in your Patron.”

Jake was a bit surprised as he raised an eyebrow, which made Artemis look quite nervous.

“Don’t misunderstand, I realize now I was wrong, and I meant no disrespect toward Malefic One,” she said, quickly continuing before Jake had time to butt in. “What happened inside Mor Tree’s Divine Realm only confirmed everything. Multiverse was truly wrong in its understanding of Malefic One, and legends of his alchemical prowess are, if nothing else, underexaggerated.”

“Artemis, regarding your opinion of Malefic Viper, I-“

“Remember that I was born after Malefic One entered his isolation. I grew up only hearing stories, and as eras passed, I, along with many or gods who’d never seen Primordial with our own eyes, began to doubt. It didn’t make any sense why such a powerful being would let his faction deteriorate, and only conclusion I and many ors reached was that reason he didn’t show himself was because he wasn’t capable of doing so,” Artemis just continued, Jake not interrupting as he low-key was curious about what she was saying.

“There were so many rumors. Only known thing was that Malefic One was still alive and that several Primordials had clashed with him shortly before he went into isolation within his Divine Realm. I don’t think it’s wrong to say that majority of gods in multiverse believed he had suffered some kind of catastrophic soul injury or that his Path had somehow been broken. I heard some stories about what happened back n, and it was possible he had suffered from what Dao Sect refers to as a heart demon... a gnawing negative emotion that resulted in his Path coming to an end and his progress stopping for good. These thoughts were born out of our own ignorance, and I fully understand if you take offense, but-“

“Artemis,” Jake raised a hand, his tone more assertive than usual. “I don’t care what your opinions regarding Malefic Viper are. They are yours and none of my concern.”

“I do thank you for your understanding,” Artemis said, looking somewhat relieved. “I realize that as Chosen of Malefic Viper, it can’t be easy for you to endure if ors speak negatively of your Patron.”

Jake shook his head and sighed, feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place. For a moment, he considered just coming out and flashing his aura of a heretic while saying he genuinely didn't feel even a shred of worship toward any god, but he stopped himself. Some things had to be revealed slowly, and it was Artemis herself who said y had plenty of time, making Jake consider his next words carefully.

"relationship between my Patron and I is ours to define, no one else's," Jake said. "I can't fully explain it to you right now, but just know that opinions of ours have very little effect on anything. So do feel free to freely express your opinion about him or anyone else, even if y are negative."

Artemis listened as she took a moment to think. "From incident with Yip of Yore, I did assume your bond as Chosen and Patron wasn't exactly a regular one, but I see I have yet to fully grasp it still."

"I think easiest way to think about it is like a friendship," Jake said, not adding that it genuinely was just a friendship.

"Admittedly, I do find that hard to imagine, but it makes it a bit easier when I think about Chosen being you," Artemis said with a smile. "For some reason, I really can't see you as pious sort."

"Because I'm not," Jake shrugged. "Besides, would you even bor talking to me right now if I was down on my knees praying to you as great hunter goddess you are?"

Artemis looked in thought for a moment before Jake clarified.

"In a non-roleplay context."

"n no, definitely not," Artemis immediately rejected notion. "It also wouldn't feel proper in any way. Power imbalances aren't healthy and can only lead to long-term consequences. Sure, re will always be some level of difference in power, but unless two people can view each or as equals, I don't think a true bond can be formed. At least not one of a nature I'm looking for."

Jake nodded in agreement as topic of discussion slowly died down, and city tour continued. trip to Jake's temporary residence within Panon of Life – a journey that could have been completed with a single teleport – ended up taking more than an entire day as Jake learned about city and just spent time with Artemis talking about what y saw.

Sometimes, y also just stood in silence and looked at outside world, Jake feeling comfortable just being re. Alas, soon, it was time for Artemis to actually do her job as y approached where Jake was to live during his visit to Panon of Life.

He came to learn that he had effectively been given an entire mountain to himself, one with a whole damn palace built on top. A wooden palace, sure, but a palace nonetheless. It was all overly fancy, but Artemis made it clear that because he was Chosen of a Primordial, y had to offer him something showy to display ir respect.

“I know it’s just political posturing and useless signaling, but a lot of people care about that kind of thing. I can’t even begin to tell you drama whenever envoys of different major factions all arrive at once. Constant bickering over who got best treatment, everything being said and done overanalyzed to Nine Hells and back... it’s utterly exhausting,” Artemis let out a big sigh as Jake and goddess teleported out of Divine Voidpiercer to appear floating in front of mountain palace.

“That’s why delegation is king when it comes to politics,” Jake said with a smile as he floated in front of large wooden palace. “I see re are people working within?” Chapters first released on **novel~fire~net**

“Not people,” Artemis clarified. “Autonomous wooden puppets. y don’t have any sapience, but y do understand basic commands. Perhaps most importantly, y cannot store information within m. As residence we often provide to mortal visitors of high status, making sure no information is leaked is naturally a priority, and your privacy within palace is ensured by its barriers.”

“I see,” Jake nodded as he turned to Artemis. “Thank you for escort... I was wondering if you would perhaps donate a bit of your time to show me what’s inside? I do also have a little gift for you...”

Artemis looked at him for a moment with a conflicted face as she shook her head.

“Jake, as I said, I believe it’s better we take things slow, so don’t try to tempt me with-“

“No, no, an actual gift,” Jake quickly backtracked and put up his hands. “As in a physical item.”

Artemis sighed with relief. “In that case, I guess I can show you place... even though I’m pretty sure you are already able to scan entire place with whatever you use for omnidirectional observation. An ability backed by quite a Perception stat, I’d imagine.”

“Well, obviously,” Jake said with a cheeky smile. “Perception is best stat, after all.”

“Obviously,” Artemis agreed without a second thought as she motioned for him to follow her down to main entrance of palace. Jake flew after her as he smiled and felt incredibly happy he’d decided to visit Panon of Life, as Artemis proved she clearly had both beauty and brain.

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Chapter 1096: "To be a gag gift, or not a gag gift, that is question." - A worried Jake

palace assigned to Jake was needlessly big, to level of it being kind of silly. It had at least a few hundred rooms by Jake's estimate and all facilities one could ever need, from a fully equipped blacksmith to an alchemy lab. One could run an entire damn product line out of re, and Jake felt very confident he would never set foot in any but one of m outside of this house tour.

When it came to leisure, it had both an indoor and two outdoor pools and several entertainment rooms, including a massive library and what Jake could only describe as a hyper-advanced wooden puppet ater. Artemis even introduced Jake to a particular formation he could use to reach out to Panon of Life and request anything he needed. Her example was if he wanted a chef to make him some food or have someone come by to make a painting or a statue of him – something apparently quite a few important guests sometimes did to commemorate ir visit.

sleeping quarters were also needlessly large. Many of rooms were spatially expanded with great flexibility to make m even larger than Jake could see a need for, which Artemis had a good explanation for.

"While most races can reduce ir physical forms, to some, it isn't very comfortable. That's why it was decided to be on safer side when constructing bedrooms," she said.

Jake stared at more than a hundred-meter-wide bed as he scratched back of his head. "I guess that makes sense; it just looks a little silly."

"Just choose a room more fitting for human form," Artemis shrugged. "re are five main master bedrooms often reserved for top officials of a faction, and I would personally recommend just using one of those. Assuming you even plan on using it in first place. Seeing as you're only one living here, entire place is private, so you could meditate wherever."

"Good point," Jake nodded as y quickly stopped by se aforementioned master bedrooms. He just briefly looked inside before y continued on, soon enough ending up in living room, where y sat down on a pair of sofas with a small table in between, keeping a professional distance.

"I think that's about it," Artemis said. "I do recognize it's very silly for you to live here alone, but usually, a Chosen like you arrives with a huge entourage of servants and slaves."

Jake nodded as a thought struck him. He had been wondering something ever since Artemis introduced that Divine Voidpiercer and decided to just outright ask her.

"I studied Panon of Life a bit on my way here, and I can't help but wonder... what is your faction's official stance on slavery?" Jake asked, really hoping answer wouldn't be something he disliked.

"re isn't really one," Artemis answered, shaking her head. "matter is too complicated to have rigid laws that can be enforced, so it's taken on a case-by-case basis."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"Hm... you have a solid knowledge of ectognamorphs, right? I assume you do, considering your creation of a True Royal," Artemis asked rhetorically. "As eusocial creatures, re is a natural caste among m, with some innately subordinate to ors. drones of a hive are born into what many would define as slavery to ir queen, and I personally have no issue with that. That's just how ir race works. same is true for ors. re are monsters that rely on controlling and enslaving ors to defend mselves, as y have no combat capabilities by mself but have everything invested in mental stats. n re are parasitic beings that cannot live without invading and influencing a host, effectively enslaving m. I do not see myself as a judge who can decide what part of nature I find acceptable, as long as it doesn't threaten ecosystems mselves... even if I do have an aversion to some things."

Jake listened and could agree with some of what she said. He had a deep, innate hatred of slavery, but when it came to Vesperia, he didn't really feel like it was same thing. Similarly, he didn't have any particularly negative reaction during Tutorial when he fought rat creatures down re, despite rat swarms obviously not being creatures of free will.

He didn't feel completely satisfied with her answer, though.

"What's your personal opinion on matter?" Jake asked. "Would you personally take on a slave?"

"I believe that depends on your definition of word," Artemis shook her head, with Jake beginning to feel a bit nervous with that answer. "I reckon Vitesse is cause of this question? I personally wouldn't classify her as a slave. re's no contract and no forced compulsion. However, from an outside point of view, distinction doesn't seem to matter much. She pledged her life to me, swearing she would serve me eternally for sparing her life. I have clarified her debt is paid, but her oath still binds her. I personally view her more as a servant now, and most of time, she's free to do as she wants to, and it isn't as if her life is bound to mine. One day, perhaps she will feel that her debt is paid, at which point she will leave, but I don't know when that will be, so until n, she is effectively a slave of her own oath."

Jake frowned a bit as he considered matter. “That does sound complicated. Have you ever forced anyone to serve you?” Official source is *novel~fire~net*

“No,” Artemis shrugged. “There was never a need. Enlightened races of Panon of Life rarely have slaves of any kind; we just recognize that to some creatures and Paths, it’s natural. We also do not judge if others have them. But you asked me about my personal opinion... and it’s hard for me to really have one. I’ve been a god for a long time, and gods don’t really tend to have slaves. We never need to. Mortals have a natural instinct to serve and worship gods, meaning we can turn majority of mortals into servants merely by commanding them to do something. With notable exceptions, of course. As for having slaves that are gods... outside of rare cases like Vitesse, that isn’t a thing at all. You would have a hard time finding a single god willing to become a slave of someone else over death. Even Vitesse definitely wouldn’t have signed an actual slave contract... not that I have any idea how to make one that could bind a god.”

“I think I should be transparent in that I’m vehemently against the concept,” Jake said after listening to Artemis’ words and feeling a bit more reassured. “In my view, it shouldn’t be a thing across the board, and if I come across a monster that enslaves people as part of its Path, well, that just makes it really easy to know my next prey. No matter how natural it is. Regarding True Royals and eusocial insects, I do recognize there is some more nuance there, but drones aren’t born with full sapience. I also think it boils down to that they are born into their place in life. Usually, those who are enslaved experience a loss of freedom, which I guess is what I really detest.”

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“Instinct to be free is very natural, and so is your empathy,” Artemis nodded. “Albeit a bit flawed as directly reflecting your feelings onto others is rarely accurate, but I can appreciate sentiment. Do let me be clear that if your concern is if I’m gonna suddenly start proposing you create an army of slaves, then you have no need to worry. I would rarely recommend getting powerful and loyal allies and friends, something you have already proven you’re quite good at.”

“Good thing we’re on the same page there,” Jake nodded, relieved. “Now, I do believe I promised you a gift?”

“You did,” Artemis nodded, though she didn’t precisely look full of expectation. Not that Jake could blame her. She probably assumed this gift was from Jake himself, in which case, what could he even give her that a god could use? Well, maybe he could create something using his abilities as a Harbinger of Primeval Origins, but he seriously doubted she expected that or even knew it was an option.

“Before you see it, I need to clarify something. I don’t actually know what it is and what it does,” Jake said, trying to cover himself against whatever happened next. He knew Villy well enough to know that even presenting it to her was a massive risk.

He would definitely not put it above snake god to have given him a gag gift. However, he also couldn't write off option that it was a genuinely great gift. Something that would benefit Artemis greatly, and if there was even a one percent chance it was something good, Jake wouldn't be an ass and deny it to her.

"What do you mean you don't know what it is?" Artemis frowned. "Is it something you found, or?"

"No," Jake shook his head and clarified: "It was created by Malefic Viper specifically to be given to you."

Artemis' eyes opened wide when Jake said that as she stared at him. "Malefic One created something for me?"

"Yeah," Jake nodded, feeling a bit sad at seeing her surprised face. "But I will warn you. As I said, we have a friendly relationship, so while I'm pretty positive it won't be anything that can harm you, I cannot guarantee it's something that will actually benefit you."

hunter goddess nodded thoughtfully, and Jake really hoped Villy hadn't just given him this gift to fuck with two of them. With a slight sense of dread, Jake took out bottle and placed it down on small table between them.

"Here it is. From my understanding, only you can unlock seals on it and see what it truly is," Jake said, wishing internally for it to be something good. If not, he definitely had a snake god who needed a kick to teeth next time he went back to Order.

With a sense of seriousness that Jake really hoped was warranted, Artemis picked up bottle with careful hands, studying item closely as she did so. She gave Jake a look, and he nodded for her to go ahead as Artemis unsealed flask, allowing her to finally see what was within it.

As she did, room fell silent. She stared at bottle, and at that point, Jake felt pretty damn confident y'd just been hoodwinked by Viper. That damn snake god had given her a gag gift or perhaps just an empty bottle or something else stupid like that, just to mess with two of them.

"Did Malefic One really create this for me?" Artemis asked after several seconds, looking up at Jake with confusion.

"That's at least what he told me," Jake sighed, preparing an excuse for his immature and idiotic friend. "Look, sometimes he's--"

"This is too much," Artemis shook her head. "level of debt something like this creates... oh... I believe I see why..."

Jake was beginning to get confused as Artemis continued speaking. “Malefic One truly values you. I’m in no way worthy of receiving a gift of this level from him, and I believe he has only one reason for doing so... he wants to communicate he does not disapprove and that you have his full backing, no matter the case.”

“What exactly did he give you?” Jake asked, incredibly curious now because it definitely didn’t sound like a gag gift anymore.

“A Transcendent-level Elixir,” Artemis answered. “As in, a kind of item that can only be created through use of a Transcendent skill. A type of item one cannot even ask for.”

“What does it do?” Jake continued asking.

“As you said, this truly is an item created for me,” Artemis said as she admired the small bottle. “It’s an Elixir that will help me tremendously when I try to break through to Godqueen. Each time a god advances, you have to overcome a wall of varying difficulty, and while I did have confidence in advancing on my own, this will speed up the process significantly and make my chance of success exponentially higher.”

“That actually sounds... useful,” Jake muttered, full of surprise that Villy had really come through for him this time around.

“This is a kind of item people of my level tend to go into wars for. A kind we enter system events with hope of obtaining, nine gods dying only for one to advance. For him to have created and given something like this to someone like me... it truly can only be a statement. I have nothing of value to offer him, and it’s evident his only reason for giving it to me is because of you,” Artemis said before letting out a small sigh.

“You’ve been transparent with me so far from what I can tell, so allow me to return some energy. I cannot in good conscience say I wasn’t looking forward to meeting you without ulterior motives. Selfish motives. Progress as a god at my level is tough, and I had hit a wall I hoped this new era’s influx of Records would help me overcome, but at most I hoped for it to be a slow process. However, ever since we met in Nevermore, my stagnation has disappeared. I have become able to progress again... and I see no other explanation than my encounter with you and all that has led to,” Artemis confessed.

She was clearly reluctant to confess that, which she really shouldn’t have been, as Jake just shrugged. “That’s good, right? You also helped me progress and even improve my archery, so at most, that just makes us even. I already confessed I had ulterior motives of getting free archery lessons.”

“I don’t think those two things are comparable,” Artemis sighed. “As a C-grade, it’s expected for you to progress easily. At most, I can help marginally speed up your progress, while to me, a single level could take countless years. At least you could before. For me, as a god, to try and take advantage of my relations to you to further my own progress is improper to say the least.”

“Let’s not act like it isn’t also pretty damn audacious of me to expect a god to give me personal training,” Jake said with a smile. “Everything in this world is a give and take. You telling me that my presence has had a positive effect on you is only good from my point of view. It’s not like you’re only god eir; Viper seems pretty pleased with progress I helped him with.”

“Malefic One has seen tangible returns?” Artemis asked with a high level of skepticism before falling into deep thought. “No... that does make sense. qualitative power in Records born from creating a True Royal and taking all-time spot on Nevermore Leaderboards has to hold some value to even a god of his level, if for nothing else but novelty and uniqueness of those achievements.”

“So, no need to feel guilty,” Jake shook his head. “As you said, for a proper bond to be forged, one needs to be equal. I view Viper as an equal, and so do I see you as one. For me to help you only makes me happy, knowing I’m not only one benefitting. While I don’t think it’s proper to keep score between friends or people who care about one another, it does still feel bad to only be on receiving end.”

Artemis looked at Jake for a moment before sighing. “You know, sometimes I forget you’re even a mortal.”

“Hey, no worries, it’s only a temporary condition,” Jake smiled, saying such an arrogant line with so much confidence that Artemis didn’t even feel like she could question it. “Also... you are right that this entire place is definitely way too big for one person to live here, so wouldn’t it make my visit more comfortable if at least one more person stayed here?”

hunter goddess looked at Jake before smiling and shaking her head. “Well, I was assigned to be your escort and to make your stay pleasant, so I guess I’ll have to sacrifice myself this once.”

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Chapter 1097: Swords, Vines, & Birds

blade cut through web of vines as swordsman expertly avoided thorns covering m, even as y shot out, aiming to impale his body. A screen of water protected him as a green blast sought to push him back, allowing him to continue his pursuit as druid in front of him slammed her staff into ground.

A vast fissure appeared between Sword Saint and Dina, seeking to swallow him up as a torrent of vines erupted from beneath. Miyamoto's eyes opened wide as he hadn't felt movement of magic from beneath, barely giving him time to react as he teleported back, Dina having effectively created distance.

"That wasn't regular magic," Miyamoto commented as he prepared to charge again.

"This is Panon of Life," Dina answered with a smile. "Easy for life to be hidden where you least expect it, and sometimes all you need to do is ask for a little bit of assistance."

Bloodline. Right.

Stone-like thorns erupted all across battlefield as Sword Saint was forced into air, seeking to get away from ground that Dina used to attack. With a teleport, he closed distance once more, allowing his blade to approach dryad. However, he severely underestimated her, as she had learned some new tricks since ir days in Nevermore.

Right before Miyamoto had a chance to land his blow, Dina's body erupted with energy as a wooden carapace formed around her, fully encompassing her body. Vines instantly erupted from sphere of solid wood, striking at Sword Saint as he dodged and swung for defensive barrier.

His blade managed to cut deep into wooden cocoon, but to land his attack, he had to pay with some blood of his own as a thorn penetrated into his shoulder, forcing him back.

Right as he retreated, wooden cocoon instantly retracted, and he found himself staring at a staff pointed at his head. staff began to glow as it exploded with green light, sending a beam of condensed energy toward Sword Saint, who was still mid-air. Unable to stop his momentum on his current trajectory, Miyamoto had no choice but to defend as he also made use of some new means of his own.

Lifting a hand, a flat plane depicting image of a pond was summoned between himself and Dina, with beam of green light impacting it nearly at same moment it appeared. pond displayed in image rippled on impact, absorbing green beam entirely as Sword Saint stabbed into pond from behind, making ripples suddenly intensify as a large droplet of water, slighter larger than a fist, was ejected from image.

Dina was definitely surprised, but her defensive sphere activated in time to attempt to block attack. A loud splashing sound was heard as large energy-infused droplet hit barrier of bark, impact smashing Dina into ground, creating a large crater.

Sword Saint didn't waste this opportunity as he stabbed repeatedly downwards, his arms moving at several times speed usually possible, releasing a rainfall of piercing beams of water upon sphere, instantly putting several holes in it.

However, before he could even follow-up, holes began to mend mselves, making Sword Saint not even try as he stopped. Dina's barrier also retracted a moment later as she stood re, breathing heavily.

"I lost," she said, sounding quite tired.

"It wasn't certain," Sword Saint slightly disagreed.

"I would definitely run out of mana first, and if I pushed you too hard, I don't have confidence in blocking some of your best offensive skills," Dina continued to insist. "Without Bobo, I would already have been in great trouble."

"Speaking of Bobo, did he evolve?" Sword Saint asked curiously. He assumed that wooden cocoon was created by living armor she wore.

"He did," Dina smiled happily. "Mor Tree helped me in endeavor, but I also trained a lot with him on my own."

"You have definitely grown a lot," Miyamoto said proudly.

"Not as much as you," she shook her head. "I don't want to make excuses, but it's really hard to compete with those who participate in system events."

"Prima Guardian event wasn't that good when it came to gaining levels," Sword Saint shook his head. "It wasn't an event focused on challenging individuals but entire galaxies. only Prima Guardian I would classify as truly challenging was one Earth faced, and re, we had a fighting force that I doubt any C-grade could have ever defeated."

Dina nodded as she also finally dispelled her staff. Sword Saint took her cue to leave as he looked at battlefield y had torn up nicely, entire local area destroyed.

"Is it fine to leave it like this?" Sword Saint asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Dina asked. "Nature doesn't care what landscape looks like. It adapts. Besides, barrier ensured no creatures lived re before we started fighting, and I'm sure now that it's dispelled, beasts that will be nourished by our remnant energies and Records will flock to it."

"I see," Sword Saint nodded as he and Dina headed back toward residence provided to him by Panon of Life. That was place y'd chosen as ir spot for get-togers visiting faction.

two of m passed through aforementioned barrier after flying a little, and Dina took out a token mid-flight and dispelled it, unsealing this orwise mostly empty area of Great Planet.

On way back, y stopped by anor similar barrier. It was transparent, allowing m to see what was happening within as y saw a bird having some fun of her own.

Sylphie was flying circles around a party of five who fought back with great coordination as y tried to defend mselves while hopefully locking down hawk, hoping to buy only a single moment to give m a chance to counterattack.

Sadly for m, Sylphie was quite elusive one, avoiding anything y tried as she dodged in between towers of vines and walls of stone that sought to seal her in, liberally switching between her form as a beast and wind itself. Or times, she just blew straight through whatever y put in her path.

At same time, constant attacks came from all sides upon party of five. y were undoubtedly skilled; however, Sylphian Hawk heavily outmatched m in terms of both skill and raw power.

“Mistress, Lord Sword Saint,” a voice spoke from behind as a group of five approached, ir leader addressing m. He was a young wood elf wielding a bow, definitely giving off vibes of a classic hunter. “How long have you been watching?”

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Sword Saint held back a chuckle as he knew why young man asked. His body was healed, but his armor was marred with cuts all over, showing he and his party also had a tussle with hawk earlier. What’s more, based on how much more haggard he looked than his or party members, it was evident Sylphie had put extra attention on him. Likely due to his choice of weapon. Not just because a ranged combatant was dangerous to Sylphie if he managed to land a shot, but because she probably assumed he was most dangerous person in ir group, seeing as bow user she knew best was definitely most dangerous in any party he usually found himself in.

“We just arrived,” Dina answered, only glancing at wood elf for a moment before turning her attention back to Sylphie’s fight. “How many groups have faced her so far?”

“This is sixth,” young man answered, seemingly relieved y’d just gotten re. “y’re definitely strongest party, but... that Sylphian Hawk isn’t something people like us can ever hope to defeat.”

“She’s only something you can’t defeat as you are now,” Sword Saint corrected him. “We have all barely begun on our Paths. Do not define your own future so early in your journey.”

“Ye... yes, senior,” young elf bowed, a bit flustered. He glanced at Dina to see her reaction, but she didn’t move; she simply watched Sylphie. Not to say she wasn’t listening in.

"I'm pretty sure he's older than you. At least by a little," Dina spoke telepathically to Sword Saint, clearly finding the situation amusing.

"Quite observant of you. Now, do you know why he was so embarrassed when he asked if we saw his fight?" Miyamoto asked, deciding he could do a bit of teasing himself.

"I assume he and his party lost badly, and he doesn't want us to think less of him for it," Dina answered casually.

"Oh no, he doesn't care what I think about him. It's you he doesn't want to think less of him," Sword Saint chuckled to himself. *"It's pretty obvious this young man wants to get closer to you. Hopes you notice him. Ah, such youthful spirit."*

His words left Dina momentarily stunned, much to Miyamoto's delight. He found it fun to tease Dina, probably because she reminded him a bit of his own great-granddaughter, Reika. Both had been considered geniuses throughout their lives and nurtured in a sheltered environment. They had also both lacked maturity and growth in similar areas, and Sword Saint was happy to have helped Dina during Nevermore to truly learn who she was.

He knew how hard it could be to live a life that was all about the expectations of others. From his conversations with Dina, he knew she had been nurtured and guided since she was very young, primarily because it was discovered she had inherited a powerful variant of Nature Attendant's Bloodline. Such a thing was a massive boon, but it also came with a heavy sense of inherent responsibility and expectations of greatness.

Growing up like that, Dina's life had been all about simply doing what she was tasked to do. To train in what she was told to train in, to learn what she was told to learn about. She'd made very few decisions of her own and thus had very little opportunity to decide what kind of person she wanted to be. What kind of things that she liked... what kind of people she liked.

In Nevermore, that all changed. Nobody in their party told Dina what to do. Sure, she had a job during floors, but she had way more autonomy than at any other time in her life. During downtime, she was free to do whatever, and while she'd been given a number of textbooks and what Sword Saint could only compare to "homework" to do during Nevermore, she still had plenty of free time to do what she wanted.

Miyamoto was proud of how far Dina had come. During the early parts of Nevermore, she had also confided in him that many of the members of Panon of Life had urged her to try and get closer to Chosen of Malefic Viper with hopes of creating a romantic bond. Dina already knew that her grandfather wouldn't be against it, and while he'd never outright encouraged her, there was some insinuation she was expected to at least try.

Not trying to live up to that particular expectation was one of Dina's first real breaks with what others wanted of her. Sword Saint also found the very concept silly. There was little to no chemistry between Jake and Dina, and he knew Jake had no interest in Dina from his point of view as she definitely wasn't his type at all. What's more, Jake and nature affinity didn't mesh well at all, making the prospect even more silly as even their Paths didn't mesh. In again, as the saying goes, opposites did attract... even if it often ended in disaster.

In any case, Jake and Dina were never going to happen. Of that, Miyamoto was sure. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel*■*fire*■*net*

Luckily, it seemed that Dina hadn't been hit with any backlash. There were still many from her faction who wanted to see a powerful alliance forged between Order of Malefic Viper and Panon of Life, especially now that Viper had proven he was indeed worthy of his title as a Primordial, but they left Dina alone. Especially after Yggdrasil began to personally give the young dryad occasional guidance.

Besides, it didn't sound like the hopes of Panon of Life were entirely squashed based on what Dina had said about the god called Artemis. Sword Saint was curious about what was going on there and would love to talk with Jake about it, as Dina had only let a little slip accidentally here and there. From what little tidbits he heard from Dina, it did sound like something interesting was developing there.

"You shouldn't tease me like that... and we both know I'm not... you know..." Dina replied once she'd gotten out of her stun lock, also making Miyamoto stop reminiscing. He nearly considered continuing to tease her, but it looked like he wouldn't quite have time for that.

Within the barrier, Sylphie had finally managed to properly isolate the healer from the rest of the group by blowing him all over the place, and without any assistance from his allies, the poor guy was pummelled into the ground in an assault that could have been lethal if Sylphie had attacked with intent to kill.

With one member of a well-coordinated party down, picking off the rest of them proved quite easy for Sylphie as she took them down based on how durable they were, starting with the easiest prey first. By the time only two warriors were left standing, they simply surrendered to save themselves from embarrassment. Not that they looked good, as they'd definitely already taken quite a beating.

Sylphie looked quite proud of herself as she puffed out her chest. The five defeated members of Panon of Life picked themselves up and respectfully bowed to the mighty hawk before leaving to lick their wounds.

"Seems like she's done," Sword Saint said. "She must have spent a fair deal of mana, considering she took down six groups in a row."

"I'm not so sure, she fought a lot using her Authority of Wind," Dina said, clearly fully on board with no longer teasing one another. "I would guess she did same in her other fights."

"Hm, true," Miyamoto acknowledged. "She's still done, though."

"There also aren't any more challengers," young elf tried to insert himself into conversation.

"I did think place looked a bit empty," Sword Saint nodded as he looked at Sylphie, who had just taken out a snack of her own and quickly eaten it.

After her snack, Sylphie decided to fly toward himself and Dina as she spotted him. She barreled through barrier set up for her to fight members of Panon of Life, and after throwing a scornful look toward young wood elf hunter, that made poor elf, along with his other party members, leave. Once they were gone, she turned her attention back to Dina and Sword Saint.

"Ree! Ree!" she screeched excitedly.

"Oh, he is?" Sword Saint said with surprise. "Well, we'd better get back there soon, huh. He did take his time, which makes one wonder what he's been up to."

Miyamoto was naturally speaking of Jake whom Sylphie had just informed he was waiting back at his residence where he usually stayed at. He'd already been at Panon of Life for about a week at that point, and after Jake left him on space vessel to go with gods, he'd been a complete no-show.

Naturally, Sword Saint had his own theories of what he'd been up to, but none he wanted to share openly, lest it spread needless rumors. He would tease Jake incessantly, though. He did consider him a friend, after all.

"I know he had a meeting with Mor Tree and Grandpa," Dina said. "I also heard he brought him gifts from Malefic Viper. Apparently, exchange happened within Divine Realm of Mor Tree, so he may have needed a few days to digest whatever he saw there. It's a very overwhelming place to experience, especially first time."

"That's certainly possible," Sword Saint nodded, not entirely buying it. He viewed it as far probable that Jake had either met up with Artemis and spent last week with her, or found an alchemy lab somewhere and decided he wanted to make some monstrous poison based on concept of life.

Knowing Jake, both scenarios were roughly equally probable.

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Chapter 1098: Peak Fantasy

Yeah, my palace is definitely bigger. y don't even have an indoor pool! Jake thought proudly to himself as he inspected large compound assigned to Sword Saint during his stay with Panon of Life.

Although place was still excessively large for housing just one man, it wasn't as extravagant as Jake's palace. Sylphie also stayed with old man, and Jake suspected that Minaga and Dina frequently visited. He was quite sure Dina temporarily stayed re as well.

Speaking of Dina, plan had originally been for Jake to meet up with Sword Saint and Sylphie shortly after ir arrival to reunite with dryad healer from ir Nevermore party. However, Jake got caught up in his own activities, delaying his reunion by a week.

Jake admitted that he hadn't reached out entirely due to his own realization. He and Artemis had spent last week toger, primarily discussing various everyday concepts and topics while also engaging in ir own activities. Jake spent his time reading tome left by First Sage.

After about a week, Artemis had to leave to attend to a matter that one of her avatars couldn't handle alone. Within an hour of her departure, Jake reached out to meet up with his old party members as he had an opening in his schedule.

It was hard to say if he and Artemis had made any progress in ir relationship since gift exchange, but Jake felt things were developing positively. He felt comfortable with her presence, and she had lightened up more over days, making things even more casual. Things were slow, but that was totally okay. As Artemis had said, no one was in a rush.

When Jake reached out to see Sword Saint, Dina, and Sylphie, he was asked if he wanted an escort or simply coordinates to teleport directly from his residence to Sword Saint's. Jake questioned practice of effectively giving out house keys to ors' homes but accepted it as he went through gateway, which was reminiscent of those used by Order of Malefic Viper.

He guessed that y were a standard design refined throughout eras, making m look similar. Alternatively, someone might have an excellent gateway business running somewhere that Jake would be glad to invest in.

Upon arrival, Jake learned that perhaps he shouldn't have been in such a rush as re was no one present. He found more wooden puppets, similar to those at his own palace, and learned from m that masters of house were currently not re.

Jake already knew Sylphie wasn't re, as he could feel her approximate location very far away, courtesy of Union Oath. On Great Planets like se, distances often got so vast that flying around as a C-grade wasn't feasible. Jake could likely fly straight for a hundred years or two without ever feeling like he was getting closer to wherever she and ors were.

It wouldn't take long for m to return using teleportation, so Jake decided to wait and chill while internally bragging about how much better his palace was than mansion compound provided to Sword Saint.

Approximately an hour later, three of m finally returned, walking out of gateway wall at entrance to compound. Sylphie was first one out, quickly locating Jake and expertly landing on top of his head. Jake had been sitting in courtyard waiting and smiled when hawk snugly sat down.

"You look like you've had fun," Jake commented, feeling that Sylphie had recently been in a bit of a tussle. She had spent some energy, and remnants of mana still lingered around her body, giving off traces of wind magic she had been using.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched happily, confirming that she had indeed been beating up young prospects of Panon of Life.

"You also look like you've been having a good time," Sword Saint smiled as he walked over. "Such a good time that you entirely forgot our promise to reunite." Fresh chapters posted on [movel*fire*net](#)

"I didn't forget it; I just delayed it slightly," Jake shot back, stopping himself from shaking his head to avoid disturbing bird sitting up re. Turning slightly to Dina, he smiled. "It's good to see you again, and from your aura, I can tell you haven't been slacking off."

"Neir have you," Dina nodded in greeting. "My achievements since we last met are insignificant compared to yours, and I want to congratulate you for finally slaying that Ell'Hakan guy. I know you really didn't like him, and it must have been cathartic to finally remove his Bloodline from multiverse."

"It sure was," Jake agreed with a nod, making Sylphie a little annoyed.

"I'm also glad that Malefic One finally had an opportunity to prove his prowess. Many of newer gods had put a lot of hope in Yip of Yore as a sign that old guard was no longer only ones worthy of standing at apex, but that also gained him a lot of enemies. His power made him worthy of being considered a supreme genius, perhaps surpassing all before him, but it also made him arrogant to point of foolishness. According to Mor Tree, ignorance was main cause of his downfall, and if he had merely chosen to strengn himself for a few eras, he would have one day stood alongside Primordials."

"At least such great talent didn't go to waste," Jake said with a chuckle, getting a confused look from Dina. That reminded him that ors didn't know Malefic Viper had transformed Yip of Yore into a succulent meal of Records, making him quickly make up an excuse.

"I mean that he will at least be remembered as someone who dared to face a Primordial, even if he died, and I also benefitted from entire situation, so it isn't all bad," Jake said, sprinkling enough truth in re for Dina to nod in understanding.

"It's certainly good that matter was handled," Sword Saint nodded. "Ell'Hakan was a threat we could do without, and with him gone, galaxy is stable now. Well, as stable as one can expect a galaxy to be right after a war."

"Luckily for us, we don't have to deal with post-war issues," Jake grinned.

"True, we did run off to first universe, leaving everything in hands of our subordinates," Sword Saint nodded with a smile. "Do you predict we'll have to return when universe begins to open up and allow lower-level C-grade visitors from rest of multiverse?"

A case of literary ft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report violation.

"I guess we'll find out," Jake shrugged. "If Miranda and ors need help, y can just contact us n. With veil around our universe weakening, it will also be easier for us to teleport back and forth, so even if bad actors try to stop us from returning, I seriously doubt y're capable."

"Good point," Sword Saint agreed. "Which is preferable, as I hope to stay here for a while. Dina already told me about some of hunting grounds controlled by Panon of Life, and it seems like we have quite a set of options. three of us discussed going toger, but I have feeling you won't join us?"

Sylphie stared hopefully down at Jake, and Dina also looked like she would like him to come, but Jake sighed and shook his head. "Maybe at some point for a small adventure, but not here in beginning. I'm strongest when I'm alone, and my Path revolves around sneak attacks and facing down powerful foes on my lonesome."

Jake stood out in that none of ors relied on stealth in any way. three were combatants who directly confronted ir opponents, with Sword Saint often announcing his presence on purpose to give his foe time to prepare for a duel. In Nevermore, things had worked out well, but Jake had only gotten better at running solo since n.

Lone Hunter and upgrade to his stealth skill were two primary reasons for this. Both were best when he was alone, with Lone Hunter not working at all while fighting with a party. In summary, it was simply best he fought alone, and that was sole reason why—

"He just wants to spend time with Artemis," Sword Saint joked, shaking his head.

Dina looked a bit panicked when he said that, and Jake looked at old man with an inquisitive gaze. "What do you think you know?"

"More than I did just a few moments ago," Sword Saint smiled. "Don't get me wrong, I realize whatever you have going on isn't truly my business, but do excuse this old man for being curious... and supportive, if you would prefer that."

Jake was about to say something but stopped himself. Denying anything would just look weird, but he also didn't want to disclose anything personal, so he chose to say nothing at all. As for comment about being supportive, Jake knew that in multiverse, Sword Saint was perhaps one of only people who genuinely wouldn't find situation where a mortal and a god got close as odd. Jake especially didn't think he would after witnessing scene with a certain vampire goddess shortly before y went to Panon of Life.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, and Jake couldn't help but reply to her.

"No, I haven't decided on where I want to go hunting yet," Jake shook his head.

"He's waiting for Artemis to propose a spot," Sword Saint just had to butt in again.

"Ree?"

"No, I won't go hunting with her," Jake shook his head, and he wasn't even being fallacious with that one. If Jake went hunting, he didn't want Artemis anywhere nearby or even observing him.

Villy had made it clear to Jake many times that loss in Records from fighting while under protection of a more powerful being was extreme, to level of severely hampering growth. Artemis naturally already knew this and wouldn't even propose sticking around when Jake went off to level.

Now, if y were talking about strategic breaks to reassess and for him to get feedback and stuff, that was naturally entirely different and definitely wouldn't count as going hunting toger.

Dina, who'd been watching m banter, smiled as she let out a small sigh. "I did miss this... during Nevermore, I admit I found constant bantering a bit annoying at times, but afterward, it felt weird when it was gone."

"That's why we're having a reunion!" Jake said jokingly. "To bring us back to days which really weren't that long ago."

"We are missing someone, though," Dina let out a louder sigh. "I heard what happened with Fallen King... and I really hope a solution can be found. I understood re was still hope."

“Actually, I did want to talk about that,” Jake said, making others look a lot more attentive than before. “When I met with Yggdrasil and Nature’s Attendant inside Primordial’s Divine Realm, I asked Nature’s Attendant to help me find a solution to hopefully heal Fallen King.”

“Did you use favor he owed you from taking me with you to Nevermore?” Dina asked.

“Feels a bit weird that you know your grandfar tried to bribe me into bringing you, and for records, I would have said yes even if he hadn’t said he’d owe me one. Oh, and yes, I did try to cash in that favor, but he and Yggdrasil both rejected it,” Jake shook his head.

“I’m fine with what my grandfar did, and I’m happy you at least tried to use favor to help Fallen King,” Dina said with a sad look. “If even Grandpa and Yggdrasil rejected using favor to help him... I don’t know what else—”

“No, no, you got it backward,” Jake quickly tried to clear up misunderstanding. “y said it was too easy for it to count as a real favor.”

“Jake, sometimes your lack of communication skills really shines through, as that definitely wasn’t on purpose,” Sword Saint shook his head.

Scratching his head, a bit embarrassed, Jake tried to elaborate. “When Carmen killed Desolate Child of Loss, a fragment of Fallen King appeared, and inside my mask, Truesoul of Fallen King still lingers, along with something else apparently. A copy of Fallen King’s memories or something like that... not entirely sure.”

“Ree, ree?” Sylphie asked with a lot of hope in her voice. Jake knew she was one of people who had taken Fallen King’s seeming demise hardest as two of them had faced Desolate Child of Loss together.

“Fallen King knew what he was doing,” Jake answered. “You should all know that arrogant asshole wouldn’t make some noble sacrifice without at least leaving himself a hope for survival. Before he went off, he infused mask with some unknown energy and even fragment Desolate Child had bound its existence to housed energies of King. He laid all groundwork for his eventual return, and with Yggdrasil and Nature’s Attendant on case now... I have confidence this will eventually become a true reunion.”

Dina smiled and nodded at his explanation with Sylphie also letting out a happy screech. Sword Saint didn’t look that surprised at Jake’s revelation as he simply nodded in acknowledgment before asking:

“Do you have any clue as to a timeline?” old man asked.

“None. Yggdrasil said that she will contact me once she needs my presence,” Jake explained with a sigh. “With gods, you never know how long something takes, and I’m just happy some progress is at least being made in that department.”

“If anyone can help bring someone back from brink, it’s Mor Tree,” Dina said with confidence. “Have you considered what else you will ask of my grandfar since he didn’t accept helping Fallen King as a real favor?”

“Honestly? Not really,” Jake confessed. “I could always just ask some alchemy stuff, but I have feeling he won’t accept that as a real favor, eir. Genuinely, I don’t know what I even could need from him.”

Dina looked to be thinking for a while as she also considered matter. After a bit, she suddenly turned incredibly nervous and began to talk in a low voice. “I... do have one idea, but I’m not sure if I should say it. It may come off sounding a bit... I don’t know... blasphemous.”

Jake was so ready for even Dina to begin to tease him about something Artemis-related, but what she said instead was definitely something he hadn’t expected.

“Sylphie mentioned how your bow was broken, and my Grandpa is really good at creating living weapons from wood, and as it’s a bow, I think he could help you. weapons he makes can evolve alongside you, growing on ir own,” Dina proposed, and Jake definitely liked sound of that.

He had considered getting a new bow as one he’d gotten from Maria was just a temporary one, but seeing as he felt semi-close to B-grade, he didn’t want to “waste” a favor from Nature’s Attendant on one.

Jake didn’t quite understand why Dina would find that suggestion blasphemous in any way, though... at least not until he heard final part of her idea:

“When he makes a weapon like that, he needs a base to grow it from... and you said Mor Tree also wanted to offer some help... so... maybe you could get one of her branches?”

Hearing that suggestion, Jake really didn’t have to think long.

What kind of self-respecting hunter would say no to idea of having a bow made from World Tree itself? That was peak fantasy right re.

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Chapter 1099: Split Up Once More

Jake almost wanted to go and talk with Nature's Attendant immediately but controlled himself, deciding he wasn't in a rush. Besides, he and Yggdrasil were already working on helping Fallen King, and Jake didn't want to come rushing in only a week later to ask for another favor.

Instead, he decided to wait until y called him. That way, it would also seem as if Jake had considered the matter for longer. When Jake asked Dina more about this idea, it became clear he really wasn't in a rush, as creating such an item wouldn't be a quick process.

"Grandpa used his skill to create Bobo, and that took about a decade," Dina explained. "Even before Bobo was fully created, he was already half-grown, with Grandpa telling me he began preparations before my birth. If he is to create a bow for you, it will take quite a few years, especially if you convince Mor Tree to donate a branch. There are Records you want the bow to have, which also affects the process..." NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON **novel•fire•net**

"Would it be possible to use Records from an existing bow?" Jake asked, curious.

"That depends on a lot of things, I would guess," Dina said, shaking her head. "Only Grandpa knows all the details, so you'll have to ask him if you choose to go through with this idea."

"I see," Jake said, nodding, hoping that his Bow of Apex Hunter would find new life once more with the help of Nature's Attendant. The system-given bow from way back in Treasure Hunt still had the best damn enchant he'd ever seen on any weapon, and it just fit Jake perfectly. Definitely by design, as the system had made it specifically for him.

All of that bow stuff was for later, though. For now, Jake stayed and spent some time with his former party members from Nevermore, even though two of them were people he already spent time with regularly. Naturally, he couldn't help but have a small spar with Dina after Sword Saint mentioned she'd improved a lot, and while he won in the end, she definitely hadn't slacked off.

From Dina, Jake also learned that there were many young hopefuls who would love to duel Sword Saint and Sylphie, but for some reason, their interest in fighting him wasn't really real. Jake didn't really understand this until Dina explained.

"You don't expect to survive it," Dina said, shaking her head. "You're Chosen of Malefic Viper. In order to challenge you, you need to have an equal status, or your acceptance will be a loss of face even if you win. There's simply nothing in it for you outside of discouraging others by making examples out of the first fools who dare challenge you."

“Ree!” Sylphie heavily protested that assumption. Not that Jake would kill anyone daring to ask him for a spar, but sentiment that challenging her wasn’t also super dangerous as a loss of face, as her status was definitely also significant.

“y’re just ignorant,” Dina said, shaking her head as she addressed both Sword Saint and Sylphie. “Because you both “only” have Divine Blessings, your status in eyes of strangers is leagues behind famous C-grade Chosen of Malefic Viper.”

“In all fairness, he did beat us in Nevermore due to individual performance,” Sword Saint said, shrugging. “And in this case, I think he’s one losing out by having such an intimidating reputation.”

“Definitely!” Jake said, shaking his head. “It’s kind of frustrating that I can’t even get some good sparring in just because of what ors assume. It would be fun to fight some elite parties, as I honestly feel that fighting coordinated parties of elites is something I don’t have as much experience in as I should. Last party I fought was this group from Holy Church, and while y were a bit too weak, it was still a good experience. Well, not actual experience points. You know what I mean.”

“What happened to this party?” Dina asked.

“y were enemies,” Jake replied.

“So y’re dead?” Dina asked.

“Obviously,” Jake replied.

Dina didn’t say anything more, but Jake got point. He could see why ors would find it intimidating to challenge someone y believed to be a lot stronger than mselves, especially when y didn’t know how prone that person was to simply kill whoever he dueled.

“Guess I’ll just have to stick to fighting people I know,” Jake said, sighing at prospect of not being able to beat up strangers.

“Or those significantly stronger than yourself,” Sword Saint suggested. “I’m confident you can find some party consisting of peak C-grades who are willing to spar. From my understanding, Artemis has quite a few blessed beneath her and good connections in Panon of Life, so I’m sure she could find people for you if you only ask.”

Jake nodded. That definitely was a possibility. Also, even if he didn’t find anyone to spar with, Jake wanted to go training and just fight things to death. Sparring was all well and good, but nothing was better than facing a foe who could take his life should he make a momentary lapse in judgment.

After this conversation, y talked about or random topics for a few more hours, and soon enough, y decided it was time to split up once more. Sword Saint and Dina decided to go hunting toger while possibly finding someone else to join m with a more tanky disposition.

Sylphie decided she wanted to visit Sylphs she'd noticed upon arriving at Great Planet. Dina had already helped her get some information about se Sylphs and learned it was a small commune of elementals led by Sylphs. All of m had gared due to a supreme natural treasure that took form of an utterly massive tornado that stretched seemingly infinitely into sky, connecting ground with a wormhole connected to a World Wonder not even from first universe.

From what Jake gared, re was a World Wonder in twenty-second universe known as Vortex Pinnacle, which was essentially just an utterly massive orb-like structure of powerful winds gared toger in emptiness of space. Of every World Wonder Jake had heard of so far, this one seemed most useless, but it apparently did occasionally give birth to some very powerful natural treasures, and those who trained in wind-related magic and concepts naturally viewed it as a holy land.

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It was a very dangerous place, and winds occasionally grew powerful enough to tear holes in void between worlds, allowing tornadoes like one striking down on Great Planet to manifest. Due to winds weakening significantly while passing through void, this tornado on Great Planet created an environment where even mortals could benefit, though re was an elemental god ruling commune of Sylphs.

From every conceivable angle, it would be a waste for Sylphie not to visit Sylphs. Dina also assured Jake she would be given a divine escort as Panon of Life didn't want to risk a guest running afoul, especially not one who was a party member of Dina and close to Chosen of Malefic Viper.

With Sylphie, Dina, and Sword Saint all leaving to do some hunting and training of ir own, Jake decided it was also time for him to approach Artemis about same. He wasn't sure if it was training or hunting time first, but a swift conversation should clear that up. No matter what, Jake wanted to finally get moving and his bow shooting arrows.

Before y parted, re was one thing he'd been wondering.

"Does anyone know what Minaga is up to?" Jake asked group.

He hadn't heard anything from or about Unique Lifeform for past week, and Minaga didn't tend to be silent sort when he was around. Jake knew Minaga had some business with Panon of Life, but considering he'd brought an extra S-grade clone, Jake had halfway expected him to keep it on standby just to lurk around Jake and his friends.

"No, All-God Legion hasn't stopped by since we last parted," Sword Saint said, shaking his head.

Dina and Sylphie also shook their heads, making Jake wonder even more. Duskleaf had also been entirely missing in action, but that was a lot more expected as Jake would assume alchemist to go into isolation even if he was technically available to hang out. No, Minaga being nowhere to be seen was definitely-

"Maybe he just had something really personal to do," a fifth voice joined conversation. "Or he was waiting to be missed. Really hard to tell with that guy."

It barely had to be acknowledged, but newcomer was naturally Unique Lifeform in question. He'd teleported in just after Jake asked about him, almost as if he'd been waiting for an opportunity... which did strike Jake as a bit odd, considering he hadn't felt anyone observing him during their talks. Odd enough for Jake to ask.

"How did you even know we were talking about you?" Jake asked directly.

"He used my name," Minaga said, shrugging as he pointed at Sword Saint. "I know when people use my name, and I have a clone nearby."

"It isn't very surprising," Dina said, nodding. "Many gods know when their name or title is spoken."

"That's also my understanding," Sword Saint agreed.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, making Jake feel a little better that she at least seemed confused about something.

"No, you need to use exact words that refer to god," Minaga said. "Of course, actual words won't be same due to translations and whatnot, but meaning of title or name used has to be exact. So, if you refer to me as that handsome devil or Supreme Maker of Labyrinths, it has no effect, but if you use All-God Legion or Minaga, I'll vaguely be aware of it. Especially when it's people I'm already mentally aware of who do it."

Jake had not expected some divine exposition, but he welcomed it nevertheless. In retrospect, he probably shouldn't be surprised at what he was told, either. Viper has emphasized prior that words held power, and something like names and titles had to have a lot of Records associated with them. Records belonging to beings spoken about.

Chances were that when Jake finally became a god, he would also know it when people mentioned .

"You really didn't know?" Sword Saint asked Jake. "You never noticed?"

"In his defense, it doesn't work with him," Minaga sighed. "He has a skill from his True Blessing that entirely blocks that kind of thing. Well, among other things. It's actually quite annoying when I try to stalk him."

"Stalking is a crime," Jake muttered.

"So is murder, but you still killed one of me in Nevermore," Minaga said in a serious tone. "I should have you prosecuted."

"You have no evidence," Jake pointed out.

"I shall call Wyrmgod of Nevermore to stand!" Minaga said with conviction. "entire encounter was recorded, and I hereby submit this recording into evidence."

"I object to handling of evidence and question veracity of this so-called recording," Jake countered. "Unless any physical evidence can be submitted, I seek an immediate dismissal."

Minaga and Jake both, for some reason, turned to Sword Saint, who'd been appointed judge. Two of them had likely thought gag would end there, but old man ended up shaking his head. "I do not believe I have jurisdiction to even make a ruling. Even if I do, crime happened in Nevermore, and unless Panon of Life has an extradition agreement, I find it questionable if any prosecution can ever take place."

"I win," Jake said with a smile.

"For now," Minaga said, crossing his arms. "Just know that should you ever set foot in Nevermore again, we will throw book at you and go for maximum sentencing. Which is to say nothing, as I'm pretty sure killing things inside of Nevermore isn't actually illegal."

"... I do think we have an extradition agreement with Nevermore?" Dina said, tilting her head and a bit behind on joke.

"Eir way, I declare diplomatic immunity," Jake said, shaking his head and smiling. "Anyway, back to question we originally asked, what have you been up to, Minaga?"

"Stuff," Unique Lifeform shrugged.

"More specifically?"

"God stuff."

"Very enlightening," Jake said sarcastically.

“Well, thank you,” Minaga smiled. “Don’t complain too much about not seeing me enough. You’ve all been busy anyway. I wouldn’t wanna crash in on you and Artemis when you’re busy getting to know one another.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Jake said, only semi-sarcastic with that one.

“I do have some actual work soon, though. I’ve been asked by Yggdrasil to assist in improving some magic formation and whatnot since I’m here anyway, and considering stuff Panon of Life will donate to me and Nevermore as payment, it should be worth my time,” Minaga explained.

“That sounds like actual work,” Jake said, impressed. He wasn’t surprised that y asked for help from Minaga, though. Due to his unique circumstances, he borderline didn’t have any skills. That is to say, everything he could do was freeform magic and abilities. His insight into magic had likely reached a level far beyond even those superior to his strongest clone. In addition, his perspective very likely also differed from others as he didn’t have any skills to help with any part of the process when doing magic. Finally, he had so many damn clones that could help with doing mental stuff. He was like a web of supercomputers that could cooperate on every task that took any brainpower.

“Gotta make a living somehow,” Minaga shrugged. “Got a big family to feed, you know.”

Jake shook his head and smiled at Minaga still being Minaga. god – in an S-grade clone - didn’t leave immediately either but stayed around for a little as five of them chatted. He was especially curious and asked more about his fellow Unique Lifeform, Fallen King, and seemed pretty happy that y were working on getting him back.

Alas, all good things must come to an end, and soon enough, Jake found himself returning to his own residence. The palace felt even bigger and definitely way emptier with Artemis not around, but Jake knew she wouldn’t be that long, so he chose to take this time to do some practice on the meditation front.

After that, it was time for some hunting and archery practice, likely in combination, so he could train archery or try with Artemis before deploying it in practice while hunting. He was already looking forward to it and all the wonderful hunting grounds Panon of Life possessed, but for now, it was meditation time.

And meditation time meant reading time.

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Chapter 1100: First Archery Lesson

Visualization was key. All skills had Records that represented m, and all Records could be imagined if one understood m well enough. At least, that had always been Jake's understanding. He needed to fully understand a skill before he could properly visualize it within his Soulspace.

However, that assumption was far from complete. It wasn't wrong per se; it was just one of many ways to make a visual representation of something appear in Soulspace. source of this content is *novel●fire●net*

easiest way was one Jake knew, seeing as re was already objects within his Soulspace with physical representations. Absorbing a physical item that turned into pure Records was incredibly easy to visualize and see within Soulspace. In many instances, it was even unavoidable as physical nature of items was part of ir Records in first place, making m appear within Soulspace without owner of soul even trying to make it so.

Villy's drop of blood, Eternal Hunger, and book from First Sage were all such items. Right below m, in things easy to visualize, were one's energies and general Path. sky of arcane mana, crystal forest below, and all of what Jake had summoned during his training with First Sage as he improved his Anomalous Soul were all considered part of what was easy.

If Jake wanted to heal his own soul and repair Palate of Malefic Viper, he would have to move up a level of difficulty. Visualizing specific skills was very difficult in comparison to his Path in general. All skills were part of Jake's Path, and he would effectively have to isolate a segment of Records and visualize m.

Such visualization wasn't as rudimentary as merely imagining how a skill would look within Soulspace. Imagination and interpretation were certainly part of it, but most important aspect remained to comprehend skill itself or alternative option Jake was now looking into:

Understanding very concept of skill visualization, and rar than fully comprehending a skill to visualize it, employ assistance of system in matter. To do that, Jake had to be able to "see" skill, and he could only do that if he could better understand his own Path and all building blocks that it was made of.

Meditate was – in words of First Sage – a skill primarily made to understand oneself. Jake had spent a lot of time and effort understanding his own body and pathways of energy going through it. He had even studied soul with purpose of creating poisons to destroy it.

This understanding had helped Jake create a very powerful boosting skill, likely reason he'd obtained Arcane Supremacy to further strengthen his body, and perhaps most importantly, it was what let him move the way he wanted to, when he wanted to.

Compared to other fighters, Jake had far fewer times when he wanted to dodge something but simply wasn't fast enough. He didn't miscalculate minute distances but dodged with a hair's breadth purposefully. His instincts allowed him to know and adapt, but to do that in the first place, he needed to understand the hardware he was working with, something that had also come very naturally to him.

Understanding his own soul was to understand software. While it wasn't exact words of the First Sage, Jake thought his comparison was rather apt. Using a skill was just knowing how a program worked, while understanding a skill fully was to understand the entire codebase. A daunting task, especially if the skill was something as complex as the Palate of Malefic Viper.

However, what if Jake didn't have to understand the entire code but just how to use the directory system of software that was his soul? What if all he needed to do was learn how to – and then successfully – locate and navigate to the Palate of Malefic Viper. What if that was all it took to then spark the system to help create a representation within Soulspace, as Jake would have effectively isolated the Records enough?

Needless to say, this was all still a gross oversimplification, but the concept was there, and Jake remained positive as he progressed toward this goal, using the book left by the First Sage as his guide. By now, he'd already gotten a lot better at many things.

Standing within his Soulspace, Jake raised a hand as a swirling orb of dark green energy appeared. It began to change shape and morph, wings sprouting as it turned more physical, scales scattered throughout the storm of energy, mixing with several other concepts and powers.

Yet as the swirling mass of Records began to increase in size, it began to wobble. The spinning orb became erratic, the energies no longer balanced, and the Records' unity was broken. A moment later, the entire swirling mass of Records broke apart, resulting in a massive explosion of malefic light that Jake easily suppressed as a barrier of arcane energy encompassed it.

"Corrupted, huh," Jake sighed as he once more leaned into the software analogy. What Jake had just done was summon all Records related to his Malefic Viper legacy skills. As they represented such a big part of his Path, Jake could create that swirling, incomprehensible mess of nine skills mixed together, but even when he did so, it wouldn't last long.

Because some of the Records in the swirling mass were broken. Corrupted. Like a memory leak in a program or some bug that would inevitably lead to a crash. Records from the broken Palate of Malefic Viper affected the balance between all Legacy Skills, and Jake

came to better understand how disastrous it would be if he evolved with a broken skill. Assuming he could even evolve it in first place.

As doing a full system reinstall wasn't an option, Jake would have to repair that one broken program and fix corruption. He would have to locate files that had been corrupted when he failed to forcefully upgrade his Palate of Malefic Viper back n and personally replace m with new ones that were uncorrupted. In or words, he would have to get new Records and get rid of some of old ones.

I'm getting closer, Jake thought to himself as he turned back toward book and kept reading as yet anor chapter would soon be unlocked. By now, with all he had learned and could do, Jake was confident that if he decided to try and upgrade his Meditate skill at that moment, it would be a legendary rarity one, and not even a bad legendary rarity skill at that.

But he still hesitated as he wanted his upgrade to be "perfect." He didn't want it to be just good enough. Maybe it was possible that if he upgraded Meditate skill now, he would be able to use it to repair Palate using it, but that wasn't all Jake wanted upgraded Legacy Skill of First Sage to be capable of.

Jake was greedy. Of that, re was no doubt, and so far, he was happy with his progress. Even if he did feel as if he was frying his brain a bit furr he got into tome left by First Sage. Jake had no idea how many chapters it had in total, but so far, he'd gotten through seven, nearly unlocked eighth, and he got feeling that when he was done with chapter ten, it would be time to upgrade Meditate skill.

A case of content ft: this narrative is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report violation.

It had been about three weeks since Jake had reunited with Dina, and during all this time, Jake had just been cooped up and meditating in his own residence, working on understanding tome. After having been back for four days, he got word that Artemis would also be back after roughly three weeks, so now, Jake was just waiting for her return.

Anor fourteen hours ended up passing before palace got a whole lot less lonely.

She didn't even bor to knock, not that she had to. Jake had given her permission to come and go as she wanted and whitelisted her on all barriers, after all. He vaguely felt her observe him before, and a few seconds later, a figure appeared within chamber where he sat in meditation.

Jake smiled and, within his Soulspace, closed tome of First Sage before opening his eyes to see Artemis standing in front of him. She, in turn, observed him, her expression a bit weird as if she'd seen or felt something she definitely hadn't expected to.

"What were you doing?" Artemis asked, looking at him with a mix of astonishment, respect, and just plain old confusion.

"Meditating," Jake answered casually as he acclimated to world outside of his Soulspace. He'd spent over a week in constant meditation, and he did feel a bit out of it and needed a moment to fully return to real world.

"You were doing more than that... I felt something odd. A presence, almost. Ancient. Powerful," Artemis wondered out loud.

"I was reading within my Soulspace," Jake explained, not seeing any reason not to answer honestly as he knew he couldn't actually explain what he was doing even if he wanted to.

"Reading you say... what exactly could you have been reading that would produce that kind of effect? I didn't get notion it was something related to Legacy of Malefic One, but something else," Artemis muttered, clearly fishing for an explanation to soo her curiosity.

"I sadly can't tell you," Jake shook his head.

Artemis sighed. "I understand. Everyone has ir own secrets."

"No, I literally can't tell you," Jake did something Villy had done several times to him before as he smirked. "It's related to Forbidden Knowledge. book I'm reading is Forbidden Knowledge made material."

"You have a book full of Forbidden Knowledge within your Soulspace?" Artemis asked.

"Yep. With knowledge not even Viper knows about," Jake said with a cheeky smile.

"And you can't even give me a hint who this book was made by? I must assume it's a Primordial or at least an individual with power approaching one," Artemis really wanted to know.

" creator is already dead," Jake shook his head, wanting to convince her it was hopeless to even guess creator.

However, it seemed that explanation wouldn't fly as Artemis just kept looking at him before frowning. "You just said something considered Forbidden Knowledge, didn't you?"

"I did," Jake confirmed, not having known that even simple fact that First Sage no longer lived could be considered Forbidden Knowledge in this context.

"I see..." Artemis let out a loud sigh as she looked at Jake closely. "You really are hiding a lot of secrets, aren't you?"

"Come on, who doesn't like someone with a flair of mystery?" Jake said in a teasing voice. "I wouldn't even say this one is my top secret."

"I reckon that one is related to your Bloodline somehow," Artemis said.

"I can neither confirm nor deny that," Jake said, genuinely not knowing if that would be considered his biggest secret anymore after what happened in Nevermore. He was probably more to be revealed, but even that remained a secret to Jake. At least for now.

"Keep your secrets," Artemis smiled and shook her head. "I've cleared my schedule for a good while and will have avatars handling my daily matters. I also heard that your comrades have left city to explore territory of Panon of Life on their own, and I can only guess you want to do the same."

"That I can confirm," Jake nodded. "I want to hone my archery a bit before I go hunting, though. In that way, my leveling can double as practice for what I want to improve. I'm confident I could do well already if I decided to just go now and try to improve on my own, but some good feedback would definitely go a long way."

Artemis nodded, having already expected this as they'd discussed it earlier. "I would be glad to help. I'm not going to really be teaching you anything, though. I saw a recording of my image in Nevermore, and from that, I'm clear on the fact that you're not the type of person to learn from purely. You need to experience something first-hand and reach an understanding on your own."

"Malefic Viper has said something very similar in the past," Jake nodded in complete agreement.

"That being the case, I believe the best approach would be for you to experience archery at a higher level directly," Artemis said as she smiled. "Plus, it should be at least a little nostalgic for you, while to me, it will be a chance to experience something I've only seen recordings of myself doing."

"I see great minds think alike," Jake said, as he already knew where Artemis was going with this.

Seeing as Artemis was so much stronger than Jake, it was hard for her to show him anything he could learn from. That's why they needed a way to level playing field and not make sheer power a limiter... and Jake had just the thing for it, something Artemis already knew all about.

Taking out the item he hadn't used since he used it in a duel with Carmen, he and Artemis both used Identify on instinct.

[Emblem of Grand Champion (Mythical)] – An emblem infused with powers and concepts of Colosseum of Mortals, given only to those deemed worthy. This Emblem can create a replica of Colosseum of Mortals arena within a virtual space for individuals to duel one another. Allows user to choose two targets who must consent to take part in a duel within virtual space. Those entering will leave their true bodies defenseless during duel period. All levels and stats of those entering will be normalized. Most skills and abilities will also be restricted. Dying within virtual space will have no negative consequences. As owner, you can always observe inside of Emblem of Grand Champion. Cooldown period: 1 hour.

Requirements: Soulbound

This was likely perfect item for this exact kind of situation, and Jake didn't doubt creator of item knew that when giving it out in Nevermore. What's more, because Jake's actual archery skill wouldn't exist within Colosseum of Mortals, he wouldn't get any of system's passive benefits but would have to consciously think about using it.

same was true for Artemis, so it would truly be a difference in competence that separated them.

"We should enter right away," Artemis said. "There is an hour cooldown between each use, after all. Might as well get that running."

"You think I'll go down that quickly?" Jake said with a cheeky smile.

"Yes," Artemis said without a moment's hesitation.

"I guess we'll see," Jake said as he used Emblem. Artemis didn't resist, and moments later, they found themselves standing across from one another within familiar Colosseum of Mortals.

They each stood behind their respective gates that had yet to be lowered. All equipment one could ever want was available, and the two of them decided on just going with a bow each, along with basic starting armor, which offered no real protection.

"You promise you won't be dejected no matter what happens next?" Artemis yelled.

"No worries," Jake assured her. He remained confident and was ready for her to take first shot.

"Alright... let's start simple with a quickdraw," Artemis said as she lifted her bow, knocked an arrow, and loosed string in one fluid, quick motion.

Before arrow was even released, Jake's danger senses screamed at him as he dodged to the side, right as an arrow flew by him, second Artemis had let go of string.

Jake felt cold sweat run down his back as he felt as if he'd just dodged a sniper bullet. speed at which arrow had flown made no sense at all, and all he could do was stare as goddess with stats equal to his own looked at him with a little surprise.

"Impressive speed... let's try again, but this time, no breaks," Artemis smiled as she took out another arrow. "Dodge well."

Not needing a reminder, Jake barely dodged next arrow as he stepped to side... only for another one to come at him right away. Jake bent his body out of shape and barely dodged it, leaving him in a position unable to react as a third struck him in thigh. It barely penetrated into his flesh, but it stopped all his movements and made him vulnerable as another, more powerful arrow struck him in chest before a final one to eye ended his very first training session.

Two of them were instantly thrown out of Emblem with Jake's death, as he found Artemis looking at him with a smile. "Let's have first lesson be about one of simplest concepts of archery re is... speed."

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