

# **The Primal Hunter**

## **Chapter 401: Dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper D-grade entrance-test**

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Jake had only stood with Draskil for a few minutes while waiting for the last group to arrive, but it had been enough for him to establish himself. He did find the very purposefully built room interesting in that it had clearly defined levels. It was made for people to separate themselves into tiers of power by default, making some stand higher than others.

He decided to go back to Reika and the others for the next part as they all went through yet another teleportation gate. The good thing about these gates was that at least they showed the other side before entering, and there was no feeling of actually being teleported.

They appeared within a new chamber that held a number of discs that reminded Jake a bit of the one below Haven. The demon ushered them all towards one of them as the group silently followed. Jake made sure to inspect the people he was with, and one general mood seemed to dominate: nervousness.

Nervous for what, Jake didn't know. It was potentially the fact they were surrounded by more powerful people, and while walking to the disc in question, Jake also felt many auras. A lot of which he knew would be able to utterly curb-stomp him, as there were several C-grades among them.

"The entire entrance test should take about a day to finish for the fast and up to a week for those on the slower side. As mentioned, you will be allowed entrance no matter the result, but better performance will lead to more benefits upon entry. All other details will follow after the test," the succubus said as they stood in front of the disc.

Jake looked behind her and inspected the disc.

### **Dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper D-grade entrance-test**

**Requirements to enter: D-grade**

**Requirements to enter met**

## **WARNING: Only 1 challenger per entry**

It was indeed a pretty standard dungeon, and Jake was ready to go as someone else spoke up.

“Will this test involve combat or be purely focused on alchemy?” an elf asked.

“Naturally it will,” the demon asked, looking at the elf as if she was an idiot. “It will also involve tests of general energy control and auxiliary skills.”

Jake had to admit, he also found the question a bit silly. Of course there would be combat. After all, it was a dungeon designed by the Order of the Malefic Viper. At least no one was stupid enough to ask if-

“Will it include any real danger of death?” a human asked, and to Jake’s dismay, it was one of the alchemists that had come with him and Reika.

This time not only the demon looked at him like he was an utter moron, but nearly everyone did. He didn’t even get an answer as he just tried to make himself smaller as the demon muttered under her breath. “Damn newcomers.”

Draskil, who stood at the front of their entire group, suddenly just stepped forward as he walked onto the disc and disappeared. The demon nodded approvingly as others also followed suit as entire groups went onto the disc and entered together. Well, individually, but they went there together. So... together alone?

Jake turned and threw a look at Reika behind him. She nodded, and Jake felt her nervousness. He also knew it wasn’t really for herself but those she was with. Jake nodded back as he took a step forward and teleported onto the disc as he disappeared, teleporting for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

Irinixis looked on as the last native disappeared. The last few had been a bit slow, but it wasn’t like she could expect too much from natives of new universes. At least not all of them. This batch had quite a few good ones and at least one absolutely outstanding one.

The Order had not seen a Malefic Dragonkin for longer than she could remember, and yet more than a hundred had appeared during the last half a year or so. All because the Malefic One was truly back. She couldn’t help but wonder if the dragonkin called Draskil was perhaps the Chosen, but the chances were low. To meet the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was not something she could ever dream of even doing. It seemed as unrealistic as meeting the Lord Protector or the Malefic One himself.

Shaking her head, she went over to one of the transference gates and manipulated her token as she went back to the office.

“Hey Irin, that was quick,” she heard a voice say the second she entered.

“Hi, boss,” Irinixis – or Irin for short – greeted her immediate supervisor. “And yes, it went rather smoothly.”

The main office within the Order was a massive complex handling most internal workings of the Order of the Malefic Viper. These offices were all connected, even to the external branches, and usually, each Hall had one main office each. However, since there was only one Hall now, there was only one main office.

“Anyone noteworthy in the batch? Always exciting to get people from far-off places,” her boss asked again. The boss was a succubus like her but had already evolved to C-grade and gotten promoted only a few years ago. They came from the same clan, so they had always had a good working relationship, and both knew they would be colleagues of the same rank in a decade or so.

“A few,” Irin answered as she turned serious. “There was a male Malefic Dragonkin among them. Level 185.”

“Didn’t they only get integrated less than a year ago? Even with special events and Nevermore, that is outstanding,” her boss whistled. “But even so, his foundation may be a bit unstable for the test. Do you think it is possible he is... you know?”

“The reading said he carried a divine Blessing, given by the Patron,” Irin said gravely.

“That... really? Oh... oh my. That was unexpected. Luckily we have a day at minimum to prepare everything. No matter the result, have him placed in the highest level courtyards and make sure the humanoid resources department prepares adequately for him,” Irin’s boss answered.

Irinixis nodded as she hurried on with today’s work. She knew being in charge of the administrative work of this group would lead to something big with someone as outstanding as a Malefic Dragonkin carrying a divine Blessing.

Heck, maybe some of the others would also be pleasant surprises.

Jake opened his eyes once more as he found himself within a hall. Before him was a massive and intricate gate with the motif belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and as he looked at it, the expected system message popped up.

**You have entered the dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper D-grade entrance-test**

**Objective: Complete the entry-test**

“Seems easy enough,” Jake muttered as he went forward and up to the gate. A handprint matching a human hand appeared on it, and Jake naturally placed his hand

on it as he felt energy enter his body. Very familiar energy, once more giving him flashbacks to the Undergrowth and the gate there. But one thing was different. This time, Jake could feel what it did.

The pulse of energy went straight for the area around his heart, and he barely felt it interact with Shroud of the Primordial as it just went straight through and scanned the outer part of his Truesoul. He knew it had just successfully Identified him without Shroud doing anything to block it, and he couldn't help but frown.

It was like the Identify worked on some higher concept than usual. *Directly system-done, perhaps due to it being a dungeon?*

Either way, he felt the pulse leave his body again as, finally, he could move his hand. The motif on the gate lit up as it slowly started opening, and a figure popped up in front of him. A projection.

It was a vaguely humanoid shape, but as the figure became fully detailed, it was clear it was actually some kind of humanoid lizard, not that different from the Malefic Dragonkin. So probably another type of dragonkin.

"If this test included the ability to hide from Identification skills, you would get top marks there," the projection said first thing as it appeared. "Sadly for you, that isn't the case."

"Damn, that is the one thing I bet on," Jake just shrugged casually. He was a bit surprised at the demeanor of the projection as it seemed too... lax? Or was it just Jake who had gotten too used to uptight officials and a restrictive education system?

"Seems like we're all in for a disappointment then," the projection said. "Now, let's get this started. Follow me."

Jake did as told and followed the projection through the now open gate as it began talking. "This entrance test will test your abilities in areas related to both alchemy and combat, with alchemy being the primary subject. The tests will vary based on your specializations, but some things will be mandatory, such as testing your skill in working with toxic materials. Any questions so far?"

"Nothing related to the Order of the Malefic Viper itself?" Jake asked a bit curiously. He had expected some religious stuff to be there.

"This isn't a test to be a cultist but an alchemist; why would knowledge related to the Order and the Malefic One matter? Also, most who take the entrance test are new to the Order, and you can't expect much. Finally, much of the knowledge related to Order is unconfirmable and subjective. This projection was placed here in the second Era, and I am certain much has changed since then," the projection answered quite concisely.

Jake nodded as the projection took it as a sign to continue.

“Based on your overall performance during all tests, you will be ranked from one to five stars, with each star having ten levels to it. A one-star will be considered a failure, and anything above two stars is considered above average. You can choose which segment you want to do first. Do you want to get the combat portion out the way immediately or start with alchemy and finish off with combat?”

“Any benefits to either option?” Jake asked.

“If you suck at one, you can get it out of the way, though if you suck at alchemy as a human, I have no idea what you are even doing here,” the projection answered curtly.

“Well, let’s hope I don’t then,” Jake said. He also wondered what the many additional presences looking at him were all about. It wasn’t only the projection in front of him observing, but he felt more than a hundred others. It was honestly a weird feeling being under such scrutiny, but he didn’t comment on it aloud.

“So? What first?” the projection asked again.

“I am fine with either,” he shrugged.

“Alchemy first, then.”

They came to another gate that the projection opened with a mental command leading into a large circular room, looking not unlike Jake’s own alchemy lab. The room began shifting and changing as more than a hundred boxes appeared. All of them were sealed up with items inside. Jake could only see the inside due to his sphere, but he believed each held herbs.

“The first task is to test your ability to identify herbs and natural treasures. Note that your Identify skill will be unavailable during this test, not that it would help much. There is a total of one hundred herbs; you have an hour total. Describe each herb by infusing your understanding into this,” the projection said as a small crystal appeared floating in front of Jake. “Got any questions now?”

Jake naturally asked the only obvious question:

“Can I eat them?”

“Some of them are highly toxic, potentially lethal to mid-tier D-grades,” the projection answered. “But of course you can. Anything else?”

“Nope,” Jake answered, it all seeming relatively straightforward.

“Time begins when you open the first box.”

With that, the projection disappeared, leaving Jake alone in the locked room together with the hundred boxes of herbs.

*This seems rather rudimentary for an ancient order?* Jake wondered. The test was damn simple, even if it was just one of many, making him consider if there was some hidden objective or something. Then again... maybe it just was this simple? A case of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," perhaps?

He chose to believe he was right as he cracked his neck and got to work, happy he hadn't eaten breakfast.

Firstly he gathered all the boxes by sending out mana strings as he stacked them up. Each box was completely black with a small magic circle on top he instinctively knew worked to open it. He also tried to Identify a box by instinct, but the skill didn't activate.

Jake wondered if the ability to block skill usage was something normal for dungeons. The only other time he had seen it was in the Challenge Dungeon, but maybe it was something they could all do?

Shaking his head, he decided to just get to work. The more than a hundred observers curiously looked on at what he was doing as Jake opened the first box. He only had an hour total, which seemed like a lot, but considering there were a hundred boxes to go through, it means there was only a bit more than half a minute per herb.

When the first box opened, Jake instantly focused all of his Perception on the small root-like herb within.

*Water, life, nature, but... some venom? Beast-like. Once part of a lifeform using poisoned roots to attack? Plenty of toxins, but well hidden,* Jake instantly thought as Sense of the Malefic Viper and his high Perception got to work.

He began infusing his understanding into the crystal as he put it in his mouth and swallowed it. He then opened the next box as Palate did its thing. Inside the second box was a mushroom of some kind. Entirely purple with spots covering it.

*Lightning? But also something else... wait, time energy? Lightning and time? Aggressive energy too. Definitely going to have a spicy taste. Looks like shit and utterly unappetizing, which is unsurprising considering it is a fucking mushroom.*

After his initial impression, he tossed it into his mouth and chewed, feeling the sparks of electricity coming out as his hair began standing up. Palate had also done work on the first herb and made him aware of some other interesting nit-bits.

The boxes all looked identical, but the magic circles on top varied in intricacy, and Jake quickly assumed this was to indicate difficulty. Feeling spicy, he went on to one of the hardest ones as he opened it.

Inside was a single small black leaf, and Jake's initial impression was just one thing: *Death*.

He then picked it up and tossed it into his mouth. The moment it entered, it turned to a mist that bore into Jake's body as his face slowly began eroding and melting. The energy also went into his stomach and began killing his flesh from the inside, as the aggressive energy of the leaf tried to kill him.

Jake activated Scales as his flesh stabilized, and he began healing due to his naturally high Vitality as Palate also fought the energy, and with his mouth only half-regenerated, he muttered:

"Still better than the mushroom."

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## Chapter 402: You Win Some, You Lose Some

"Why does he keep commenting on the taste?" one of the projections muttered.

"A better question would be why he wastes his time inserting insults towards every fungus he consumes, most of which aren't even sensical," another chimed in.

"But his speed and accuracy..." a third one said.

"Oh no, definitely a five-star performance so far; I am just saying that having entire rants on mushrooms and comparing the taste of herbs to that of foodstuff none of us are even familiar with doesn't hold much meaning," the first projection said.

"You mean to claim "that green cake they had for sale every Saturday at the local bakery close to work" is not a known type of food?" a new projection said with a laugh.

The projection that had shown Jake around initially due to "winning" the random number generator just leaned back as he looked on as the D-grades methodically went through the boxes one by one. Level 150 human, but he had stats far surpassing the expected, making it clear he was considered genius-tier.

Moreover, his legacy skills were of high rarity, with the assumption that Sense and Palate were both at least ancient. Based on how fast the knowledge was interpreted, it was also possible he had Sagacity, and the Scales were likely at legendary rarity.



But more than anything... his Perception stat had to be through the roof. His senses dove into the essence of every herb right away. He ignored every veil that some plants placed around themselves to hide their true toxicity or purpose, and he even instantly identified those with soul-attacking properties.

"Fifty-four minutes," he said as the others turned to him, all of them also seeing the human was done. Six minutes before the limit did not seem like much, but it was considered outstanding as going through all the herbs in itself would be a challenge.

In the chamber, working as judges were a total of one-hundred and twenty individuals, all of them of various ranks, grades, levels of power, and specializations. They had all left projections there and served as a council to determine the performance of new initiates, a huge honor in itself. Together with system-assisted observation tools available due to it being a dungeon, it was hard to get a better panel.

"Let's move on to the next test," the original projection said as he disappeared.

Jake was happy pooping was no longer a thing after D-grade because he sure as hell would have gotten diarrhea after eating that much weird shit within an hour. The difficulty boxes had totally been a thing, and there had been ten "hard" items, thirty "medium" items, and sixty "easy" ones. The ten hard ones had been the most fun for sure, while the others were a bit simpler.

If he had to guess, then the difficulty was based on rarity, and the easy ones were rare with a few being epic, the medium ones were epic with a few being ancient, and the hard ones were ancient or legendary. He could be completely wrong, but his gut feelings rarely were.

He had no idea how well he had done, though. Jake had just poured his thoughts into that weird crystal thing as he went through everything, not sure what information was deemed necessary and what was just fluff. But he had to have done alright... right?

Just as he thought that, the projection popped up in front of him. "Good performance on the first test. Ready for the next, or will you need a break? Note that there are no penalties associated with breaks in between tests."

Jake just took out a health potion and drank it to restore some health as he spoke: "Nah, I'm good."

He had lost quite a bit of health due to eating extremely deadly plants and herbs. He also had to admit the test had been interesting. Some of the herbs had been quite hard to identify, and some even avoided his Sense of the Malefic Viper nearly entirely.

Others required him to use some of his other senses. Smell was a big one as it also partly stimulated Palate, and hearing even played a role with a single odd tube-like piece of bark that made a sound to mentally affect those hearing it.



So yeah, it had been fun.

"Very well. The next trial will involve knowledge and your ability to apply that knowledge, as well as test your experience as an alchemist and your ability to identify and rectify issues," the projection said as the room began changing again. "What crafting tool do you usually use?"

"Cauldron," Jake answered.

The projection nodded as a cauldron appeared in the center of the room, along with a table. "For this test, your objective is to finish the simulated crafting session fifty times. A failure will merely result in moving onto the next simulated craft until a total of fifty have elapsed. Each crafting session will require you to quickly identify any issues that crop up and apply your knowledge and experience to fix them. Merely imagine how you would do it, and even without additional ingredients, the cauldron will react as if you put them into it."

"What kind of crafts are we talking about?" Jake asked curiously.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" the projection answered with a smirk. "Would kind of ruin the challenge if you knew, wouldn't it? It would just turn into me telling you and you sitting down and studying the entire library you probably carry around with you in your spatial storage for solutions. No, for this test, you need to apply the knowledge and experience you already have."

Jake relented as he nodded, understanding the point. He was pretty good at energy control and was confident in his ability to adapt if things went south during the craft. He had also eaten a lot of stuff throughout time and even crafted a mythical item, so he went in with confidence as he went over to the cauldron.

"There is no time limit, just a total of fifty crafts. There will be a one-minute delay in between each craft for you to collect yourself. The gauntlet starts when you activate the cauldron."

With that, the projection disappeared again, and Jake got to work as he sat on a chair in front of the cauldron. He focused his mind as he put both hands on it and infused mana. The cauldron was a bit like the practice cauldron Villy had given him after the tutorial, so he was already looking forward to this test.

As his mana invaded the cauldron, he felt it come to life as suddenly different types of energy existed within it as if several herbs had just been put into the cauldron. The cauldron made him aware he was crafting some kind of healing item, but a stream of energy went haywire just as he realized this.

Jake tried to get it under control, but it was simply running wild. He considered implementing other herbs to try and control it, but nothing came to mind. It kept getting worse as Jake isolated some of the beneficial energy as he got an idea.

Pure destructive arcane energy entered the cauldron as it surrounded and utterly destroyed the haywire energy. Jake then manipulated the energy he had isolated with stable arcane mana earlier and began fusing that. He even added in a herb that suddenly came to mind, and a minute after, the cauldron made him aware the craft was complete.

It emptied with energy, and Jake breathed out a sigh of relief at succeeding in the first craft. *Quite a bit harder than expected*, he thought, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

The minute passed as the cauldron filled again, and this time it was some kind of toxin. A few seconds in, Jake realized it was a neurotoxin, but this time some of the energy also didn't seem to fit as Jake felt the entire concoction begin to weaken itself.

Jake didn't have much experience with neurotoxins but applied general knowledge as he once more poured destructive arcane energy in to fight off the energy destroying the creation. At the same time, he pushed the unaffected energy to merge, and less than a minute later, the craft was finished as Jake got another win.

The third and fourth went much the same. The fifth was an utter failure as Jake tried to destroy the energy, but when he did so, everything else just fell apart as it resulted in his first failure. Luckily he refined his approach a bit and got better at isolating and destroying the unwanted energy completely every time.

On the thirty-ninth craft, he bumped into something very familiar. Necrotic Poison. Jake felt the energies mixed, and once more, something cropped up that should not be there. However, this time, Jake had another idea than to isolate and destroy as he instead added in three herbs that came to mind he had used in the past. The overwhelming death energy from the Bluebright Mushrooms and some of his own blood consumed the unwanted energy and only empowered the creation, while he tossed in a third type of mushroom to stabilize the entire thing.

It was a great success as the craft finished.

The next few were back to the same tactic of isolation and destruction. At least where it worked. Jake did get one more at number forty-seven where he got an idea as he bumped into a soul-affecting poison, and he used a similar tactic as he had when he made the poison for the big mushroom that had been down in the biodome.

When he finished craft number fifty, Jake took a tally, seeing he had only failed a total of six out of fifty crafts. It wasn't ideal, but he had completed the craft nearly nine out of ten times, so his overall evaluation had to be quite goo-

"That may be one of the most surprisingly horrendous displays of failure I have ever seen in over ten thousand years of alchemy," the projection said as it appeared.

"Huh?" Jake said, utterly surprised.

"You only had two truly successful crafts, while you just destroyed more than ninety percent of the potency for every other simulation. This is, of course, not counting those you failed completely. This is like me telling you to go weed out a garden, and you set the entire thing on fire while protecting a few of the plants with mana, leaving only those few ones alive together with fire-resistant herbs. Sure, you may have killed all the weeds, but you also destroyed the garden. You performed like someone who has never made more than a dozen different products total throughout all your years of doing alchemy," the projection said, shaking his head as he really piled on.

"I..." Jake said as he processed the words. "That does sound about right?"

"What?" the projection asked, looking at Jake weirdly.

"Around a dozen seems accurate? Mana, health and stamina potions... then I made Hemotoxins and Necrotic Poison and then some soul poison once. I also made some Agility, Vitality, and Perception elixirs. If we count rarities, it isn't that far off," Jake answered.

The projection stood and stared at him for a bit. "So, you are an utter amateur who just has an incredibly high level of mana control and Perception, as well as a high rarity in Palate of the Malefic Viper and Sagacity?"

"Kind of?" Jake answered. "I guess I am more the type that studies what to make a lot beforehand and then go in with a strategy."

"So you bang your head into the wall until your original idea works through sheer force of will?" the projection asked judgmentally.

"I wouldn't phrase it like that..." Jake tried to defend himself.

"Few would, and honestly, your way isn't terrible, but you are an incredibly inexperienced alchemist who only has surface-level knowledge of... well, everything. Having Palate and Sagacity at high rarities does not make you a knowledgeable or experienced alchemist. Only time, effort, and a willingness to diversify will give that, and even if you are highly specialized, then dipping your feet in other areas may lead to inspiration in what you primarily focus on," the projection explained.

Jake nodded, a bit surprised at not just getting a snarky comment but actual advice.

"You are talented, so don't waste it. But as for this test, well, you were shit. Let's move on to one I feel like you will handle better based on what you just did: energy control. Are you ready right away, or do you want a break?"

"Ready as can be," Jake said with a nod.

The projection acknowledged his words as the room began shifting again. Everything disappeared as it became barren before four pylon-like objects appeared, all of them looking a bit cracked and broken. In the middle was also a metal disc only about a meter across. Jake instantly felt each of them held a lot of pure mana within, and he was still inspecting them as the projection explained the third test.

"Your objective in the third test is straightforward. Your aim is to protect the four pylons from foreign energies trying to invade and destroy them while at the same time guiding and directing energies that will aim to repair the Pylons. Throughout, it will change what is beneficial for what Pylon when, and a few more factors will be tossed in to increase difficulty. Throughout the test, you are to remain on the metal platform in the center, and no tools may be used to assist you. This includes potions. The purpose of this test is to evaluate your ability to manipulate the energy of different affinities in a stressful environment. The test ends when all four Pylons are destroyed or fully repaired," the projection explained.

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"Got it," Jake said as he went to the disc in the center of the room. The moment he stepped on the disc, a small barrier of sorts covered it. The barrier was one to keep him in and did so he couldn't send anything physical out of it, but pure mana could leave. He also felt that his equipment had somehow been limited. The stats given were still there, and the increased mana regeneration and all that still worked, but he found he couldn't activate the Second Wind enchantment. It appeared this was to stop any gear with skills or anything to help with energy manipulation.

Jake quickly understood this test was about pure mana control and not really about mana application with skills. He assumed the mana around him would be mostly free of intent and thus prone to manipulation, and if energy with intent did appear, he was to use his own mana to overwhelm and control it.

This meant that the trial wouldn't only be one of pure control but also of resilience, focus, and the testee's ability to conserve and efficiently use their energies. Jake could undoubtedly make this entire thing easier by using Pride of the Malefic Viper right off the bat, but all that would do was make himself run dry faster.

"The test will begin in one minute. Good luck," the projection said as it disappeared.

Jake prepared himself as soon after he felt energy enter the chamber from all around him.

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## Chapter 403: Elective Tests

It was coming from the walls! New novel chapters are published on *novel•fire•net*

Mana seeped into the chamber passively, as the pylons also began giving off a bit of pure mana. The mana coming from the walls seemed harmless at first and began interacting with what the pylons gave off, mixing with it.

Nothing was absorbed, but Jake exerted his will as he poured some of the mana from the walls into the pylons and saw it be successfully absorbed. He also tried to pour a bit of his own mana in and found that successful. The problem was that by his rough estimates, he would only be able to fill maybe one pylon with his entire mana pool.

He began directing the energy coming from the walls, but a new type soon came. A small stream of dark mana suddenly invaded the room and went straight for one of the pylons. Jake instantly took hold of it and directed it away, as it just floated in the outer parts of the room.

Then came fire, water, and even just pure light mana. Some affinities were difficult for Jake, especially the light mana, but he managed that by encapsulating it in stable arcane mana, really making use of his own affinity. The good thing about his stable mana was that it didn't react with anything, so there was no loss in energy.

At some point, Jake had taken a seat as he entered meditation. Relying on only his Sphere of Perception and Sense of the Malefic Viper, he took charge of the room as more and more changes happened.

One of the pylons turned red as the pure mana around it no longer worked to restore but destroyed it instead. It now needed fire mana as Jake took the streams he had been keeping away and infused them into the pylon.

Another one turned black as it wanted dark mana, another began glowing as it wanted light mana, and the final one turned green as it wanted nature mana. Jake swiftly took charge as every bit of mana within the room remained under his control, but the issue was that more entered than the pylons could absorb, making the density increase for every second.

As time passed, the pylons also shifted between affinities, and more difficult types entered. Soon time affinity mana came, which was tricky as hell to control, space mana

seeped in, which Jake found a bit easier, while life and death mana both felt incredibly resilient to all control, almost as if they had a will of their own to resist.

More exotic mana also entered, a lot of which he didn't recognize, but luckily Sagacity and Sense made him aware of at least how they worked. Some he did recognize, like Myst mana, Storm mana, and other merged elements, but some were just out there, like one that seemed to make things lose their color and be weakened and another that kept splitting itself up into smaller streams that then merged and split again without warning.

But... no matter what happened, Jake remained in control. Jake was overqualified with nearly ten thousand Perception and a test no-doubt designed to be based on his level. When it came to applying his Willpower, Jake also wasn't a slouch.

Over an hour in, and Jake felt he was soon done as the difficulty kept climbing. More and more mana came in a constant stream. The entire room looked like a mix of colors, fire, solid boxes of arcane mana, streams of glowing mana running in currents around the perimeter of the chamber, and so much more.

At this point, Jake felt himself begin to be faintly challenged, and remaining in control of all the streams seemed impossible... so he kicked it up a notch. Pride of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake's presence blanketed the entire chamber, and everything came under his vice-grip of will once more.

On a side note, Jake had tried to use Arcane Awakening during the beginning to try and remain in control but found it actually made things harder. It was because of something the platform beneath him did that forced Jake to manually control the skill, making the usual system assistance that trivialized keeping it active disappear. Not that he was certain using it would be a good idea anyway due to the fact that it made all his energy a bit more volatile.

He did use his arcane affinity a lot, though. It was just better pure mana and allowed him to more easily direct the mana where he wanted it to go and isolate energies he wanted to put on hold until needed. In the end, Jake had nearly repaired all the pylons without allowing any noticeable damage to any of them.

As he thought it was about over, he felt a pulse.

From everywhere, a wave of pure destructive energy came, aimed straight for the pylons. It managed to destroy a bit of the mana Jake was controlling as it approached the damn crystals he had worked so hard on repairing.

*Oh no, you fucking don't!*

Pride activated at full power as his own mana was summoned into the room. Barriers sectioned off all the mana as he sent out a counter-wave of destructive arcane mana,

utterly destroying the wave from the room. A second later, a second pulse came, but it barely had time to enter before it too faced destruction.

A few more pulses came, but some of them were of beneficial energy too, which Jake quickly noticed and chose not to destroy. This final phase continued a bit longer, until finally, the last pylon was fully repaired, and all four of them hummed to life.

The projection appeared once more inside the room and waved his hand as all the pylons disappeared.

"I must say, we expected this test to be easy for you, not trivial," the projection said as he shook his head.

Jake looked up at the guy and had to admit... that had been a lot easier than expected? He maybe had a few slip-ups and had a bit of energy unintentionally destroyed here and there, but it wasn't that bad. Overall he wouldn't call it trivial, but it definitely hadn't been overly challenging either. Oh, but it had been kinda fun.

"Your level of energy control is... well, no comment on it really. Whatever you are doing, keep doing that. I do have some questions about the mana you used, though. It was quite an interesting one, so I wonder where you obtained it?" the projection asked.

"It's my arcane affinity," Jake answered.

"An arcane affinity? At D-grade?" the projection frowned.

"Yeah, I got it in E-grade, though," Jake explained.

The projection frowned more. "While it is a simple affinity, the fact it taps into the concepts of-

He suddenly just stopped as the scalekin's eyes opened wide. A moment passed before the projection focused again and looked at Jake. "Wait here for one moment."

With that, the projection disappeared, leaving Jake alone sitting on the platform.

Jake looked confused but just shrugged. "Did kind of want a break to regenerate anyway."

He took out a potion and chugged it as he entered meditation again, wondering what had happened.

*Probably Villy... definitely Villy.*

The scalekin projection appeared in the chamber once more as all the other judges regarded him.



"What's the hold-up? Did something happen?" another projection asked.

"By direct order of the Malefic One, we are to not include any in-depth details related to the arcane affinity in the final report, and overall strip the report of all information given by dungeon-assisted tools," the scalekin projection said.

The others looked at him with confusion for a moment before one asked: "Are we to change anything else in the tests?"

"No," the original projection shook his head. "We are to proceed as usual but keep certain elements ambiguous or hidden once done. It will not affect the final score anyway as he got the highest mark on the test."

"What is his relation to the—"

"Enough," the scalekin said. "We have a job, so do that job. Treat him like any other and merely ensure certain things are kept confidential. There are also some other minor edits to be made, but we continue as usual for now."

The scalekin said this as he prepared to head back to the testee, but he couldn't help but wonder what had happened. He had felt the attention of the Malefic One on him. He had been placed in the dungeon since the second Era, and when the Viper's presence descended, the time difference also dawned on him.

More than ninety Eras had passed. It was an unimaginable long time... but not his to ponder on. In the real world, he was already long dead, and no matter how many Eras passed, he would do as ordered. No, the reason why he was a bit shook was due to feeling the presence of the Viper gave him. He had felt it before when he volunteered to leave a projection in the dungeon, and he had interacted with the Malefic One several times before, but the difference between then and now was... intense.

The Viper of the ninety-third Era was far calmer. Collected. Moreover, he had felt genuine interest and even a trace of care from his Patron god. Something the Viper certainly never possessed back then. But more so than anything, his power had grown to entirely new levels, as he no doubt had become more powerful in every way.

The scalekin did not share his thoughts with the other projections in the council but kept it all to himself. Primarily because his thoughts could be interpreted as heretical, but also because he knew it would impact how the others evaluated the remaining tests.

Also... would they not simply make fun of his theory that the Malefic One saw a D-grade human as someone worthy of emotional investment? The sentiment was preposterous just thinking about it.

Jake opened his eyes as the projection appeared again.

“Hey, still need a bit to regenerate resources,” Jake said as he healed up. He didn’t ask any questions, and the look in the projection’s eyes was the same as before, meaning that even if Jake’s “cover” had been blown, the projection kept his cool.

The projection nodded. “That is fine. While we wait, we can go over the next phase. The following three tests will be voluntarily selected based on your own specializations. Identification of herbs, knowledge of crafting methods and recipes, and energy control are all the fundamental tests, while these three will be more specialized. So tell me, what do you have experience in?”

“Uhm, what kind of specializations? Like transmutation or something?” Jake asked.

“That is indeed one option. Transmutation, arrays, magic circles, potioning, poison concoction, flasks, elixirs, body augmentation, herb grafting, growing, cultivation, perhaps something within the field of geology, just to name a few of the more common examples. The subjects in question depend entirely on you,” the projection explained.

Jake considered it a bit. “Any details on the specific tasks? As with other things, my abilities are highly specialized. As an example, I can do some pretty powerful transmutations, but only really do it properly with one affinity... that being my arcane affinity.”

“I cannot give too many details, but both scope and depth in your skills matter. As for the products you craft, it honestly doesn’t matter much as it is more technique and ability we evaluate. You will be required to craft or transmute more than one thing in most tests, so simply being good at making one type of potion or poison won’t be enough.”

“Alright,” Jake said. Honestly, it only came down to the three things Jake even knew how to do. Magic circles? Eh, he was clueless for the most part, even if he had done a bit of studying recently. Elixirs, he kinda knew, but only a few. Anything gardening-related he knew nothing about. Geology? Was that even real alchemy?

“I choose poison concocting, potion brewing, and transmutations,” Jake answered.

“Which one do you wish to start with?” the projection asked.

“Doesn’t matter, honestly,” Jake said, shaking his head.

“Very well. Very standard choices, which is perhaps for the best. Tell me when you are ready, and we will begin with poison concoction,” the projection nodded as the scalekin disappeared again.

Jake just closed his eyes and meditated for a while.

Once he felt ready, he opened them again. “Good to go.”

The projection appeared again. The scalekin waved his hand as a cauldron appeared.

“This test is simple and will be in three parts. The first part will last thirty minutes and is for you to simply concoct some poisons as you please. Note that the actual crafting will be significantly sped up, so be on your toes. The second part will include you being given a number of ingredients, and you are to craft as many and as powerful poisons as you can before time runs out. This part will also last half an hour. The final part will involve you being given three poisons to recreate as well as ingredients to recreate them from. This part will also last half an hour.”

Jake nodded in understanding.

“The three parts will come gauntlet-style with no resting period in between, and each part will end after thirty minutes elapse, moving onto the next part if you are done or not. Time begins when you infuse mana into the cauldron.”

Jake jumped right into it as he began the test. He crafted all his best poisons and did as many as he could. He made Necrotic Poison, Hemotoxin, Fungicide, and even the soul-destroying poison. It wasn't much, but he felt like they were good enough. He did also do some other stuff and made some low-rarity poison he had created before, but nothing worth noting.

For the second part, Jake had been quite worried, but honestly? It had gone a lot better than expected. Jake had just relied on Identify, gut feeling, Sagacity, and Sense to pick out things he believed fit together, mixed in some blood to function as a catalyst to blend it all together, and created quite a few different poisons. All of them were worse than his Necrotic Poison, but some were pretty decent, in his opinion.

In the final part, Jake first inspected the three poisons and then consumed one of them. He absorbed the knowledge and began copying it, but the result wasn't ideal. For the second poison, he only consumed a bit of it and kept the rest at his side as he began concocting. He added in the provided ingredients he was certain were correct and tested a bit to get it right by adding in some more maybes. In the end, he felt like he got it pretty right, but just as he was about to begin to try and recreate the third poison, the projection appeared as the cauldron and poison both disappeared.

“Time's up,” the projection said.

Jake deflated a bit as he sat down tired on the floor. “How did I do?”

“Mixed bag. Did fine on the first part, at least in the potency of your poisons, but once more, the scope was disappointing, and it was obvious you were reaching towards the end. The second part went above expectations, but you have some habits that may need working on. Your overreliance on Blood of the Malefic Viper works fine for you, but the problem is that you inherently make poison tied to you by using your blood. It has no impact if you use the poison yourself but may be problematic for others using your

products, and it also makes tracing any poison back to you easy. As for the final part... I think we both know it went rather poorly, even if the replication of the second poison went okay. Overall your score would be considered above average, though, so don't fret."

Nodded along, Jake agreed on most but did ask: "Can you explain a bit more of what happens when I use the blood? Why is it worse for others?"

The projection gave Jake a brief look making it clear he should really know this, but he answered anyway.

"All poisons you create with your current method may be incredibly potent if you also use them yourself, but it isn't so if you sell or give the toxins to others. This is merely a part of the system and is theorized to be due to the Records infused in the creation being bound to you. There are also theories it is due to your Willpower coming into effect when you use self-made products yourself. Either way, reality is that any crafted tool that does damage or prevents damage is simply more potent when used by the creator. Your blood amplifies this effect further as it binds the item to you even more."

"So... Blood makes system-fuckery worse?" Jake asked.

"Not a phrase I am familiar with, but yes, essentially. From a practical standpoint, it does make sense that a D-grade cannot kill an A-grade simply by being given poison by an S-grade, wouldn't you say so? Or, to make an easier example, an S-grade cannot make a small explosive device that will kill anyone, but the user once used, allowing D-grades to slaughter anyone below S-grade. Perhaps it is simply the system's way of achieving balance and not make individuals overly reliant on items. At least not items they didn't create themselves," the projection explained.

Jake nodded again. Made sense to him.

"Thanks for the explanation," Jake said as he took out and chugged a potion. "Ready for the next test."

The projection smirked. "Let's do potion brewing next."

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## Chapter 404: Readiness Not Found

With a wave of his hand, a new cauldron was summoned as the scalekin explained: New NOVEL chapters are published on [novel.fire.net](http://novel.fire.net)

“The potion brewing test is similar to the poison concocting one, with only a few changes. As far fewer types of potions exist, there is a larger focus on pure potency rather than diversity. Hence, the second part will not focus as much on how many different potions you can make but how potent they will be. The final part will also not require you to recreate potions but will present to you three lifeforms, and you are to craft potions optimal to them with the provided ingredients. The test begins when you infuse mana into the cauldron.”

There was no fluff or extra information, just the same thing as before. Jake nodded in acknowledgment as the projection disappeared and he got to work.

The first part began as expected, and Jake made all the potions he knew how to... which wasn't a lot. He made health, stamina, and mana potions and then finished off by making a few antidotes he had learned to create a good while ago. He also attempted to make some potions with the ability to soothe the mind and kind of succeeded.

As for the second part, it was just more of the same as Jake experimented with the many products given. He discovered a lot of ingredients with interesting affinities and energies, and it was clear the task was to transform those into potions. Jake already had some experience with making arcane mana potions, so couldn't he also make fire mana potions? Water mana potions? So that is what he did as he created potions of many different affinities, and he even made one able to restore blood energy for vampires. He did have to admit, though... this part didn't go well.

Of the three parts – heck six parts if you count the poison test – the final part of potion brewing was the most interesting. Three lifeforms that looked to be in stasis appeared, and Jake instantly noticed how peculiar they were. One was a dark elemental with some wind affinity mixed in too, the second was a plant-like lifeform that looked like a mass of tentacles of bark, and the final was a Risen, but not a normal Risen. Instead, it was someone who had clearly attuned himself to the death affinity. More than usual undead, at least.

This was when the word “optimal” came into play. All of them could use pure mana if given, but it would not be as effective as a potion pre-attuned to their affinity in question. None of them appeared to have vital energy either, and as far as Jake knew, none had stamina either. The elemental ran on pure mana of the dark and wind affinity, the plant-like lifeform used a vital energy Jake was not familiar with but was clearly closely related to the life-affinity, and the Risen used their unique energies too.

He inspected the three of them thoroughly, not minding the creepy situation that was him studying three naked time-frozen individuals. Once he felt confident, he began crafting, starting with potions for the Risen. He quickly made a death-attuned mana potion and moved on to make mana potions to the two others. Luckily he had a lot of

experience with the dark affinity, and the wind affinity also wasn't unfamiliar due to his closeness with Sylphie.

With that, the elemental got a potion he was quite proud of. Jake then correctly identified the plant-like lifeform that just used normal regular affinity-less mana together with the life-energy, even if it didn't have a big pool of it, so he made one of those too. Finally, he returned to the Risen and began working on creating a potion restoring spirit energy – the unique resource of Risen and other undead.

He quickly found the ingredients and worked on making it, but the time ran out as he was about halfway. The cauldron just disappeared from between his hands as the projection appeared again. Jake had now failed to craft everything two tests in a row.

Jake once more slumped down, a bit disappointed in himself. "So, how badly did I do?"

"A very mixed bag. Your ability to create basic potions is respectable, but in every other area, you seem lacking. Tell me, what do you craft potions for? What is the purpose of the products you produce?" the projection asked.

"Well... to drink them?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"But am I correct to assume that the primary customer of your alchemical creations is yourself? There is a connection between your alchemy shown in all tests so far and how they all seem to focus on personal benefits. You have clearly never crafted a potion explicitly for anyone else but only on making what is useful to you. On the good side, your high Perception and ability to adapt and control energy does allow you to quickly pick up and create new types of potions, but that is no substitute for experience and actual knowledge."

Jake slowly nodded. Yeah, he did create potions for himself. Same for poisons. While he made some to sell, his motivation for crafting potions wasn't to make highly marketable products but to make something more useful to himself while fighting. Right now, that wasn't a problem as everyone around him were humans and beasts, but he could see it be problematic if he wanted to make something for Casper as an example.

Had he made money from selling potions? Sure, quite a lot. But he could no doubt have made way more if he focused on making money. Perhaps the biggest proof of his selfishness in crafting was how he had never bothered to really learn how to make antidotes. Jake himself had the legendary Palate skill, so why would he?

"Overall, these two tests have shown you have a powerful foundation to build upon, but instead of building a tall tower one floor at a time, you erected a few large pillars you then just keep adding onto without solidifying that foundation. You need to learn to craft a lot more things, not for others, but for yourself."



“Yeah... I am beginning to realize that,” Jake said. When he picked up any new product, he had to start from the beginning, but if he had experience with similar creations, it became easier to pick up something new and improve quickly.

The projection looked at him and nodded. “Are you ready for the last elective test of transmutation?”

“Just two seconds,” Jake said as he chugged a potion. “Should be good now.”

He couldn’t use potions during the actual tests anyway, so he may as well just use them in between.

“On that note, your consumption of potions is incredibly liberal,” the scalekin projection said as he turned a bit more serious. “Just a fair warning: that may become more difficult down the line. The required ingredients will get rarer and more expensive, and while you may have a lot of money to spare on them, it will be wasteful and obtainment difficult.”

Jake shrugged. “I have a feeling it will work out. Even if it doesn’t, that is something I will face when the time comes.”

“I guess that brings me to the next topic splendidly. You are recklessly impatient, a mentality that is not healthy in most alchemical work. You waste a lot by neglecting to reflect on the work you just did but just rush on. So no, you are not ready yet for the next test. Sit the fuck down, meditate, and consider what you screwed up in the prior tests and can improve on. See you in a few hours.”

Without giving Jake any chance to respond, the scalekin just disappeared again. Jake stared a bit at where it had been as he took the words in. Was he rushing? Perhaps he was trying to go faster than needed. He had already been told there was no penalty to taking breaks, so maybe he should.

Jake decided to listen to the advice, closed his eyes, and entered meditation. He considered both the tests he had been through as he internalized what he had learned. The tests had allowed him to try out a lot of new ingredients and methods, something he had no chance to normally. It was all made possible by the cauldron and special circumstances offered by the dungeon, so when he thought about it, wasting this test to also learn was just stupid of him in retrospect.

He was at an academy... so it was only right to spend his time learning, right?

“He is the Chosen of the Malefic One?” one of the other projections asked, clearly skeptical to the level of finding the sentiment comical.

“Seems improbable, he is only D-grade and not especially outstanding. The only truly outstanding thing shown so far is the arcane affinity and his Identify-blocking ability.



Also, he is human,” another one said, at least thinking about the possibility for a moment.

The scalekin projection appeared among them again, already aware of what had been said. “He is the current Chosen of the Malefic One, I have no doubt about it. As for how outstanding he is, I doubt we will be able to discover through these tests. I do agree that as an alchemist alone, he is nothing outstanding. At least not yet. He hasn’t even done alchemy for more than a year or two, so who is to tell what the future holds?”

“Even so,” another more skeptical projection said. “Those possessing such talents in alchemy must be numerous within the Order. I think everyone present here were as talented back in their heyday as this supposed Chosen is. So while he may be talented, he is not Chosen material, not at all. I am looking forward to the combat portion, though. He must be a powerful mage with his level of energy control.”

The scalekin just sighed. He still couldn’t voice that his belief in the human being the Viper’s Chosen was based on his brief interaction with the Malefic One. Why else would the Malefic One give direct instructions on not only what they had to hide on the test result itself, but even hide information from the Chosen?

While the notion that he was more likely to be a Chosen because the Viper hid things from him seemed preposterous, to the scalekin, it was not. What other explanation would there be for the Malefic One to hold any noteworthy interest in the human’s growth? Genuine, personal interest.

It would all be so much easier if they had the ability to see Blessings, but alas. It had been decided that would not be allowed to not favor those blessed.

But one thing was certain... they were all looking forward to the combat portion. First, the suspected Chosen would have to reflect a bit, though. The Malefic One had not elected to teach his Chosen any actual alchemy so far, which was not for the scalekin to question.

And the Viper had commanded them to treat and evaluate the human as everyone else during the tests, so that was how it would be done. So teaching him a bit should be fine, right? If it wasn’t, why would he even enter the academy at all?

A few hours later, Jake opened his eyes as the projection appeared. He had to admit... taking a while to actually reflect on things and think wasn’t dumb. Jake also felt more mentally refreshed for the last of the three selected tests too.

The projection observed Jake a bit before it spoke. “The last subject you have chosen is transmutation. As transmutation is such a wide field of alchemy, the test will also be relatively diverse and quite a bit different from those prior.”

“Will it be based on transmutation using Touch of the Malefic Viper, though? That is the only transmutation skill I have,” Jake asked, a bit nervous. He already knew he did transmutations in a weird way, so he really wasn’t sure if he could even do this test halfway decently.

“It is indeed one such option, but it isn’t necessary. There are many different ways to transmute, and Touch is merely one of them. Just do your best, and we’ll see,” the projection said.

Jake nodded in understanding as he motioned the scalekin to continue.

“The transmutation test has three parts just like the two prior. The first part relates to your ability to transmute items into desired affinities. Don’t worry; these will only be affinities you actually possess, based on what you have shown in the energy control test. You will be tasked with transmuting as many items into the correct affinity as you can within half an hour. The second part will require you to transmute the provided materials into ones more useable in a presented half-done creation. Note that you can skip any creation you doubt you can do in the trade for a thirty-second penalty. This part also lasts for thirty minutes, or shorter, based on how much you skip. The third and final part will evaluate your ability to transmute weapons or equipment into improved versions through whatever means you desire using the supplied materials. This last one allows you to truly show off what you are most skilled in when it comes to transmutation, as you can merge and mix as much as you want within the thirty-minute limit. Questions?”

“None,” Jake answered, having decided to just see how it would go.

“Time begins when you touch the first item,” the scalekin projection said as he disappeared. At the same time, a gem of some sort appeared on the table, which was clearly the target to transmute. Finally, a screen appeared both in front of Jake as a system notification of sorts and on a large magical screen right above the table.

### **Earth Affinity -> Fire Affinity**

Jake went over to the table and sat down. The instructions were simple, and he took a deep breath as he prepared himself mentally and reached out with both his hands as he grasped the gem and used Touch of the Malefic Viper. The gem quickly changed color, and less than ten seconds later, it disappeared as he was done.

The screen popped up again as a piece of metal appeared this time, telling him to transmute the fire mana into lightning mana. It took him a bit longer as the metal had some innate resistance, but he got it done rather quickly. This continued as the items kept popping up and getting more complicated. Equipment and weapons began appearing, and some even held multiple affinities where he had to change one or both to something else. Jake kept up his focus as he even half-entered meditation, just bringing the items to him with a string of mana so he could focus using the effects of

Serene Meditation. Not the Serene Soul part, as there was little gain in doing anything within his Soulspace.

As the first part of the transmutation test approached its end, Jake had thought: *I'm actually not shit at transmutation?*

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## Chapter 405: Angry Transmutation

Jake was pretty sure he was actually shit at transmutation. The first part of the test had passed, and the second one had begun. A half-finished concoction had appeared before him as well as about twenty different ingredients, with his task being to identify the best one of them to transmute and put in the concoction.

There was just one tiny issue.

*I have no fucking idea what I'm supposed to do.*

Okay, he knew he had to transmute an ingredient to put into the concoction, but he had no idea what to use. He quickly realized it was some mana-destroying poison, and he remembered lightning mana having the ability to “burn” other mana types, so should he add that?

Was he even supposed to transform the energy into a different affinity? He tried to go with his initial thought even if his intuition didn't make him feel it was right. Which it wasn't, as the first concoction failed as he put the transmuted herb in. [READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT](#)

A new half-finished work popped up, and Jake was just as clueless. He stumbled and tried different things for a while until he just took the time penalty and skipped. A third one appeared, and he once more had to skip.

In the fourth one, Jake managed to somehow transmute some weird liquid by combining two of the items that appeared, and it worked when he put them into the large cauldron with a half-done elixir. That gave him a bit of confidence that was swiftly crushed and utterly stomped all over for the next fifteen minutes or so as the second part of the transmutation test ended with Jake only doing a single thing correctly and way too many skips.

He gritted his teeth and did a mental reset as the final part began. The one where he could do whatever he wanted. As it started, the room changed as more than a hundred weapons, dozens of armor pieces of different kinds, gems, herbs, and a plethora of other ingredients appeared all over the chamber. It was almost overwhelming, making Jake think being decisive enough to even get started was a part of the test.

Jake did not fall into this pitfall but just got started. Strings of mana flew out as Jake furiously dragged a sword he liked the feeling of and several more ingredients straight in front of him. He then picked up the sword and began inspecting it as he cursed a bit to himself over his performance in the last test.

What the fuck kind of test was that with such stringent rules for transmutation anyway? It was like he was expected to just know what fits in where and just magically come up with a solution instantly based on a bunch of bullshit materials he had never even seen before. What the fuck was up with that?

He activated Touch as the blade began cracking and groaning from the pure energy. "Yeah yeah, stop crying," Jake insulted the sword as he just dragged a spear and an axe to him that looked to be made of the same metal. He forcefully broke them and melted them down, and just pushed the metal to merge. The three weapons resisted the merger, but Jake was having none of it as he just brute-forced his will through.

If the curse within Eternal Hunger had failed to resist being overwhelmed by Jake's will, then what chance did a few pathetic weapons in this test have?

That is when Jake noticed something else as he scanned the room with his Sense of the Malefic Viper: cursed items.

*Get the fuck over here,* Jake thought as strings of mana flew out, and Jake gathered about thirty such cursed items and gathered them all in front of him. There were a few pieces of equipment, metals, a single dagger, and just a bunch of random items, some of which looked like household items.

He looked at all of them for a second before he channeled his mana and created an arcane barrier around himself and his victim- eh, ingredients. He then picked up three cursed items and began absorbing the curses out of them as he slowly destroyed the physical item with Alchemical Flame.

The barrier was to keep all the wayward energy in and to amplify the power of Jake's own Pride as he destroyed the cursed vessels one by one and used himself as a temporary container for the curses. Now, one could argue absorbing thirty curses, none of which Jake even knew what was about, was recklessly stupid, but on the other hand, Jake was still pissed about the prior part of the transmutation test, so he really didn't give a fuck as his own emotions overpowered whatever the curses tried to do.

He pumped all of this curse energy into the poor sword made by forcefully merging three weapons. It looked like utter shit, and the “sword” barely had any edge or anything as Jake had just mashed metal together, but at least it made the vessel powerful enough to contain the thirty curses.

Now, the curses didn’t play well together, so Jake fixed that by just destroying all of them and reducing them to pure curse energy by just reducing it to its base element. He had no idea what the fuck the monstrosity he was creating would actually turn into. He just dominated the curse energies with his own presence and waited to see the result. Touch of the Malefic Viper going ham the entire time, of course.

Time passed, and soon he felt just about done with whatever the fuck he had been doing. The arcane barrier disappeared as all that surrounded him was dust of broken items, and he held a sword of sorts with bulks of metal all over it and no discernable edge. The only thing even a little normal was the handle, and that was only because Jake had been holding it.

When the time expired, the projection appeared as expected and just looked at Jake.

“This test was bullshit,” Jake said as he began rambling. “The first part I got. It made sense. But that second part was just a god damn scam. I had no information on what to do and what to put in. It would take way more than half an hour just to figure out what is expected of me. Rather just toss out the entire concoction and start from scratch and make something better.”

“But you did do one,” the projection pointed out.

“Yeah, because I got lucky, and-“

“No, because you had insight into handling it. Knowledge is a fundamental aspect of alchemy, and you are ignorant to the extreme in most areas. Your sea of knowledge may be deep as a pond but only as wide as a puddle. You need to sit your ass down and study properly for a long time. You have only done alchemy for what, a year or two? Most, even the talented, who reach your level will have taken at least a decade, probably more. True, areas you have dabbled with, you do well in, but it feels like everything else that doesn’t fall into your narrow scope of interest just falls to the wayside,” the projection answered as he sighed. “Also... you talk about the test being unfair? Tough shit. The world isn’t fair, and it is your job to adapt when thrown a curveball. Even if you fail something, just use that time properly for something else or do as you did and experiment. Use it as a learning opportunity, and don’t look at it as a failure. You are still a novice and in many ways a child in the context of the multiverse, and if this is how you react to every setback, then you need a serious adjustment of your mindset.”

Jake stared at the projection a bit and was about to counter but forced himself to calm down. He took a deep breath as he felt his own heartbeat also calm. Closing his eyes for a moment, he breathed out and felt his heartbeat return to normal.

“Sorry... I don’t handle emotions and especially losing very well,” Jake said, genuinely embarrassed. He knew it had been his Bloodline acting up again, and that experience of any kind of loss kind of triggered it. The utter feeling of powerlessness in the second part of the test had just triggered him on a basic level.

The projection looked at him. “Emotions can be both a weapon and a hindrance. In the second part, you proved how much it can be a hindrance if you lose your cool. If you’d simply kept calm, you could’ve probably created at least three or four instead of only getting one.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m sorry for my rant,” Jake said as he sighed.

“With all that said, powerful emotions can also be a weapon. Simply look at what you created in the last part of the test,” the projection said as he motioned to the monstrosity in Jake’s hand.

He only really inspected it now, and... it wasn’t pretty, that was for sure. But the aura it gave off couldn’t be ignored. Jake tried to use Identify on it but failed as the skill simply didn’t activate. The same as all his other “creations” during this dungeon, as things he made, weren’t actually real.

“So... how badly did I do overall?”

“I feel like I am repeating myself, but it was a mixed bag. The first part went okay even if your methods are crude, the second part we already spoke about, and the third part went... well, rather uniquely,” the scalekin said with a smirk as he also looked at Jake’s fucked up sword.

“Would I even qualify to enter the academy with my performance so far?” Jake asked.

“That is not for me to answer yet, but we both know your actual performance here doesn’t matter for your acceptance,” the scalekin said, shaking his head. “But I can say that your overall evaluation of the transmutation test was high-tier four stars.”

Jake was confused. “Isn’t that a good grade?”

“Yes,” the projection answered, smirking again. “It isn’t like the parts of the test count a third each, and it is an overall evaluation. The reason for your grade is the last transmutation. You dominated thirty-one curses, absorbed them without being affected, and then merged and transformed a weapon to make it compatible with the new curse you forcefully transmuted. All of this results in a product that may look horrendous, but I

am certain a skilled blacksmith could transform it into a deadly tool of destruction. So let me just ask... Bloodline, Transcendence, or both?"

"What?" Jake asked, looking confused.

"The Malefic One has already informed me of some unique circumstances surrounding you, and the entire dungeon is completely sealed off from all prying eyes by the grand array protecting it along with the Malefic One himself. Nothing said or done here leaves the dungeon without the Malefic One's approval," the scalekin explained.

"Why do you think I have either of those anyway?" Jake asked. He kinda already knew the reason, but he wanted confirmation.

"You appear immune to presences, that is why," the projection said, shaking his head. "That you didn't even notice the presence of the merged curse that affected you in your state of high emotions is proof enough you have something special. As items are not allowed during the trial, that means it must be a Transcendent skill or a Bloodline."

Jake just nodded but didn't actually answer. The projection acknowledged and smiled. "Keep your secrets then. Perhaps it is good for you to make it a habit. I shall see you in a few hours, so you have time to calm yourself completely and reach a proper mental state. The seventh test in alchemy will be the toughest of them all for most testees and tests your mentality. Note that this test will also take a long time, at least from your point of view."

With that, the projection disappeared along with everything else in the room, including the fucked up sword he had made.

He took the advice from the projection as he closed his eyes and entered meditation with a single final thought:

*Maybe I only halfway suck at transmutation?*

Vilastromoz observed the tests as he stood with Duskleaf, who had decided to join him throughout it all. His disciple was curious as to how Jake would perform, and the Viper gladly allowed him to observe with him.

"Jake really is... well... a mixed bag," Duskleaf said.

"Did you expect anything else?" Vilastromoz asked. "He is a novice, as he was told."

"Yes... but I do wonder, what concepts did they say his arcane affinity had traces of?" Duskleaf asked, clearly interested. Perhaps because he couldn't see it himself. Something that was only natural... the Viper had no clue either.



"I don't know," he answered honestly as he grinned at how wonderful that was. "I genuinely have no way to determine it, and even if I have my theories, I can't confirm them. They only knew due to the system-assisted surveillance tools within the dungeon, and once Jake is done, the projections will naturally cease to exist, making the knowledge disappear with them."

Duskleaf frowned, which the Viper understood, so he shook his head as he explained: "The core concepts of the affinity stem from his Bloodline, and thus are naturally quite unique. As for why I don't want to know and wish to see the knowledge gone? Because Jake doesn't know either. Him being told would be bad, wouldn't it? Better he figures it out himself."

"True," Duskleaf agreed, even if he was curious. He then saw something as he chuckled. "While those old teachers are quite good, they certainly do misread things at times."

The Viper agreed as he observed the internal discussion chamber of the many projections part of Jake's dungeon instance. They were currently discussing the last transmutation item in amazement as they discussed the Bloodline or Transcendence.

However, they also discussed the upcoming test. It was one to test the mentality of alchemists, primarily to see if they had a mind fit for it. The unanimous opinion was that Jake was ill-fit for the test and that he would likely have terrible performance.

Oh, how little did they know? Jake had monstrous talent in many areas, but if there was one thing he was good at above anything else, it was being stupidly focussed on borderline anything he threw himself into. The council of projections all had the understanding Jake was a volatile and impulsive individual, which was perfectly accurate, but the Viper knew this was just one side of the coin.

"Indeed. Even the brightest can misinterpret those too odd to truly understand," the Viper said.

"The combat portion will be even funnier. They are so certain Jake is a mage," Duskleaf then added.

"It sure will be," Vilastromoz agreed.

"How are the other humans doing, by the way?"

Vilastromoz hadn't checked but decided to briefly do so.

"They're all pretty shit," the Viper said, shaking his head.

"As expected?"

“As expected.”

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## Chapter 406: Pretty Easy

Jake opened his eyes as the projection appeared a few hours later. He had fully regenerated himself once more and felt ready for whatever was to come.

The projection observed him as the explanation of the next test began.

“The seventh and final test related to alchemy is designed to evaluate your mentality and your ability to successfully perform certain kinds of tasks. You will be put under an array that will warp time, and three hours will appear as thirty days to you. During these thirty days, you will perform a constant ritual. But do not worry if you can actually do it. This ritual is based on skills you have already shown in prior tests and, in your case, will be to create an unspecified item using a cauldron. This test is not made to be a challenge to your skills or knowledge, but simply how you act during these thirty days. Questions?”

“Seems relatively simple,” Jake said. “So... I just have to sit and craft something for thirty days?”

“Without any interruptions or outside stimuli. Just you, the cauldron, and the ongoing ritual. Minor things will change throughout the craft to force you to stay actively engaged and constantly monitor and infuse small amounts of mana in at all times,” the scalekin explained.

“Alright,” Jake nodded again. “I am as ready as I can get.”

“Very well,” the projection said as the room shifted again, and a magic circle appeared to cover the entire dome-shaped chamber, as a large cauldron even taller than Jake himself appeared in the center. “Remember, thirty days. Ah, and don’t worry about the aftereffects of time-dilation. This dilation is directly system-made.”

Jake nodded again.

“Time starts when you infuse mana into the cauldron. Good luck and stay focused. Do not underestimate this test... out of all of the tests during the initial trial period of these dungeon tests, it had the lowest overall grade,” the scalekin said,

"I won't," Jake agreed. Of course, he wouldn't. He had his ass handed to him more times than he wanted that day already. The concern and warnings from the scalekin were also genuine, so he was in for the hardest test yet.

With that mentality, he went over and placed his hand on the cauldron as time also warped around him. Jake sat himself down as he placed both hands on the cauldron, the scripts coming to life within it as the energy began moving.

It was like a magical puzzle that would continue for thirty entire days without pause as if Jake was crafting a mana potion that just took a month to complete. Jake closed his eyes as he entered Serene Soul Meditation as a mental projection of the cauldron appeared in the Soulrealm with him. Calm as could be, he began the simulated crafting session.

"Entering meditation is a highly risky strategy," one projection said.

"Perhaps good for the first day to try and stay focussed, but not sure he will last much longer," a second one chimed in.

"If that," the scalekin projection agreed. The testee had shown himself to be highly volatile, and even for a test lasting little more than half an hour, he had grown impatient and lost his head. Imagining him doing thirty days of just constantly crafting something quite frankly boring?

There would be no true challenge to the craft. It was like a job where one had to constantly draw a line on a piece of paper following a pattern, with minor changes coming in here and there where you maybe had to switch the marker to another color or maybe even use two markers for a bit.

The only challenging thing was not losing focus and letting your mind wander - not getting mind-numbingly bored and deciding the test was a waste of time. Even if the testee messed up for a bit, they could just jump back in and continue.

Before the dungeon became a dungeon during the trial period, they even had D-grades fall asleep. Some, in fact, many, had tried to speed up the process, which would make the entire craft unstable and force them to calm it down. Even the most novice alchemist knew speeding it up was a bad thing, and all the judges were happy at least the human didn't try that right away.

"A day does seem like a lot," a female judge said. "Want to place bets?"

"We are projections. We have nothing to bet and will only exist as these incarnations for a few days more at most," another one said.

"Pride is eternal," the female said. "Or are you just scared?"

“Fine... I bet on him lasting three days,” the killjoy projection said.

“Two days.

“Twelve hours.”

“Two and a half days.”

“Thirty days, perfect score,” one of them suddenly said, getting all attention on him. It was a bulky-looking beastkin who had been mostly silent throughout the tests so far. He was there primarily to be a judge of the upcoming combat section, so for him to chime in with such a preposterous opinion in the seventh alchemist test was odd.

Others began to make slight jeers, but the scalekin asked. “Why?”

The beastkin looked at the human sitting down there doing alchemy as he just shrugged. “He had the eyes of a predator when he looked upon the cauldron. I feel a fellow hunter in him. As long as the prey is worth hunting down, then no matter how boring the process, no matter how long it takes, the hunter will get his prey.”

“That is a bit of a stretch. He is an alchemist first and foremost, with his combat likely being magic-based just going from his arcane affinity and level of mana control displayed,” the scalekin said, shaking his head.

“No... he is not,” the beastkin said again with a toothy smile. “I know a fellow hunter when I see one... and that one down there makes my hair stand on end.”

The others didn’t necessarily agree, but neither did they want to argue. In fact, some were slightly swayed, including the scalekin. Out of everyone there, the beastkin was the strongest by far... already towards the peak of S-grade when he placed a projection within.

And as the days passed and the ritual continued perfectly, opinions were shifted one by one.

“Khanac had some sharp senses even back then, huh,” Duskleaf commented.

“Always had,” Vilastromoz agreed.

“How is he doing these days, by the way?”

“Probably catching up with Snappy after returning to the Order,” the Viper shrugged.

“Ah... last I heard, he got in trouble for killing a Seventh Layer Highgod from the Altmar Empire?” Duskleaf asked.

“He did.”

“It’s good now?”

“Maybe? Didn’t bother asking, but the Autarch hasn’t turned up yet, so maybe?”  
Vilastromoz shrugged. He did kinda want to see the old pointy-eared bastard again.

“Oh, okay.”

“Yep.”

With that, the two gods stayed to observe Jake a bit longer until Duskleaf left to do something more productive with his time than watch Jake do something incredibly mundane for a month.

Honestly, thirty days wasn’t even that long. Time just slowly passed as Jake did as the cauldron wanted. He quickly picked up that trying to alter the process in any way would only create problems, so he naturally avoided that and just did as he was supposed to.

Compared to upgrading Shroud, this was honestly easy. So when the projection appeared and the cauldron disappeared, Jake hadn’t even noticed thirty days had already passed, and honestly, he felt like he could have kept going a good while longer without any issues.

The scalekin looked at Jake a bit weirdly before talking. “Needless to say, you get full marks on the seventh alchemy test.”

“Really?” Jake asked. He was sure he had missed some hidden secret or something... why the hell had they called this the hardest?

“Naturally... you got a hundred percent completion with not a single slip-up,” the projection said, frowning. “That is something we only really see done by those of the automaton race.”

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“I mean... it wasn’t hard? Sure this is the hardest one?” Jake asked again. The guy was pulling his leg, right?

“No. Let me ask you, why was this test easy for you?”

“I just had to follow the scrips and the movement of the energy for thirty days? As I said, it was easy. Probably something most alchemists can easily do,” Jake said.

“That is the truth. The task itself is easy, but wasn’t it also boring? Unstimulating? Why did you, or could you, stay focused on the test throughout without losing attention for a single moment?” the projection asked, and he looked genuinely confused.

About as confused as Jake was. “Wasn’t that the test?”

“It was... but that doesn’t mean you can just do it.”

“Well, not doing it would mean I failed the test wouldn’t it?” Jake asked, trying to understand the situation.

“Naturally.”

“So I did it? I mean, not doing it would mean failing, so I had to do it, right? So, sure, it was boring, but I had to beat the test, so what can you do?”

Jake honestly didn’t get the big deal as he stared at the projection. The projection stared back for a few moments before just shaking his head. “Alright... good job either way. Now, are you ready to move on right away, or do you need a break?”

“No... I don’t see much to reflect on from that last test, is there?” Jake answered. Also, all of his resources were topped up as he had just been meditating, and his natural regeneration vastly outstripped the expenditure. He wasn’t even mentally tired as it had all been rather relaxing.

Making Eternal Hunger had been way more fun.

“There is indeed not,” the projection agreed. “So, let us move on. With the seventh test, the alchemy portion of the D-grade entrance test is over, so let us move on to the combat portion. Follow me.”

Jake did as asked as he got up and stretched a bit. He didn’t need to physically, but it felt good to do anyway after sitting down for so long. Following the projection down the hall of the dungeon, he got a look into some of the other chambers. The scalekin clearly noticed him looking and volunteered to explain.

“The chambers are based on specializations. Some alchemists have very odd special skills or hyper-focused specializations. Some are only able to craft deep underwater. Others require a large forge and flames of a certain degree, or some just craft with unusual materials. An example would be those who directly manipulate the flesh and bodies of living beings, even to the level of affecting the Soulshape.”

“Manipulate the Soulshape? Like... actually change the real body forcefully?” Jake asked.

The Soulshape was just a fancy way of saying the body's actual shape – AKA what natural regeneration would return the body to. There were many ways to affect it. Heck, Jake had affected his with the scar on his neck from his duel with the Sword Saint. It was a reminder.

Others would maybe choose to not heal a finger for some reason. The best example Jake knew was Lillian. Her face was still scarred, and Jake was certain she could have it regenerated in a day if she so wished. That she hadn't done so was none of Jake's business, but it was proof of how people had minor control over their Soulshape.

"It is some nasty alchemy for sure," the scalekin answered. "But also powerful. Especially those who create their own abominations and chimeras by combining different living beings to form entirely new creatures. They are rare, though, and it isn't the most popular branch primarily due to the many limitations and high barrier of entry."

Jake nodded along as he made one thing clear: "I know you said to expand my scope, but no fucking way I am doing that."

"Wouldn't expect you to. You could become a god by only focusing on poisons if you wanted. In fact, I would say adopting too many branches of alchemy may also hurt you as there are vast differences. Ah, but I would recommend picking up some aspects of ritual magic, primarily to learn about magic circles and runes, as the general knowledge required in the branch of ritualism is useful near-anywhere."

"Got it," Jake said. He had already picked up a skill for ritualism, so getting told it was a good thing gave Jake a great dose of confirmation bias.

"But let us address the topic at hand," the projection said as they reached the end of the hall. The gate before them opened as it led into a huge dome of sorts. When he said huge, he did mean huge. It was at least five kilometers in diameter, with a completely bare floor.

"The final part of this test is the combat portion. As actual battle power can be hugely varied based on a plethora of factors, you may find this test unfair, but such is life sometimes. Like the alchemy test, the combat test will consist of seven tests maximum. Maximum as you may do fewer based on your own abilities. Each test will merely be a fight between you and a number of opponents, and if you clear a test, you can elect to move on to the next. Quite simple, really," the scalekin projection explained.

"Does sound simple," Jake said. "What was the average number of combat tests passed in this trial period you talked about?"

"The median, four. That is what the trial period was for, to evaluate things like this. Also, during each test, the arena will change to different environments, often some beneficial to the enemies you fight."



“Will there be ones deep underwater?” Jake asked with a deep frown, already remembering the shitty water level. Would the Order really be so-

“No, the feedback of underwater tests was horrible, and it frankly favored some lifeforms too much and utterly handicapped others. Ifrits and other types of fire demons, as an example, just got screwed. Besides, most can avoid battling deep underwater by just staying away, and if they do find themselves in such an environment, they can just escape,” the projection shook his head.

“Thank Villy,” Jake sighed in relief.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing!” Jake said, having spoken without thinking. “Now, let’s do the test, yeah?”

“Very well. The first test will begin. Ah, one thing, you may hide your level and try to appear to be level 181, but due to how the dungeon works, you will face challenges according to your own level,” the projection said as he tossed Jake a small token.

“Use the token to begin the test and then simply use it to activate subsequent tests too. I wish you luck.”

“Alright,” Jake said as the projection disappeared, and he didn’t hesitate to activate the token.

The environment around him began changing as trees shot up from the ground, the underbrush was formed, and within a second, he found himself within a forest. He also instantly heard the noises of beasts. Jake stood still as he waited, feeling no danger.

Soon enough, the beasts tracked him down as six of them entered the small clearing he was standing in.

**[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 141]**

**[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 143]**

**[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 144]**

**[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 141]**

**[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 140]**

**[Flamefang Wolf Alpha – lvl 149]**

Jake looked at all six of them as he frowned.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

The six wolves just stood there, staring at him. None of them dared to attack him. Jake stared at the Alpha in the front, as finally, whatever compulsion to fight imposed by the dungeon won out over their fear.

They all charged at the same time as Jake didn't even bother. The first wolf to arrive, Jake let bite down on his hand with gloves he had already infused with arcane mana to strengthen. As it did so, he blew out an explosion of arcane mana as the entire wolf turned into a shower of blood and gore.

The second one he grasped at the jaws and ripped it open. They all kept coming as Jake tore them apart one by one with his bare hands as he felt even more bored than during the seventh alchemy test.

Finally, the Alpha died as Jake bashed its skull in. He didn't wait as he took out the token and activated it again, hoping for the next one to not be a huge disappointment.

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## Chapter 407: Dominating the Test

The combat arena changed once more as the forest was replaced with a mountainous valley. When it was done changing, the environment was bare with a mountain range in the distance, making Jake think the room had also expanded spatially.

Jake considered if he should head there, but instead, he saw movement. From atop one of the mountains came a black mass of flapping insects that would no doubt look like a black cloud to someone with far less Perception. Jake used Identify on a few of them as he inspected.

**[Soilwasp Swarmer – lvl 105]**

**[Soilwasp Swarmer – lvl 107]**

**[Soilwasp Swarmer – lvl 106]**

Each Soilwasp was about the size of a human with a large stinger and, of course, wings. As they got closer, Jake saw them point their stringers upwards towards the air as they all released their attack at once. A rain of small black, almost diamond-like shards rained down upon him as he was attacked by thousands of D-grades at once.

At the same time, Jake felt something not from the sky but from the direct opposite direction. Through his Sphere of Perception, he saw several forms move below him. He had no idea what it actually was, but it looked like some weird insects that managed to dig through the ground.

Describing these insects was difficult. They had long slender bodies and huge claws and mouths that seemed to somehow swallow up the soil as they moved through it. Jake had to be honest; they all looked kinda creepy.

With a casual demeanor, Jake raised one of his hands as arcane energy moved around it. A bubble formed around him, shielding him from attacks coming from below and above. He then turned his gaze towards the many incoming wasps as he smiled.

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Through Jake's extensive training to control Shroud of the Primordial, He had become very familiar with his own Soulshape. He had already faintly noticed how he flew a bit better on his way back to Haven, But it was not only his wings that had improved.

In the same vein that understanding a skill, it helped improve it, understanding your own body also made you better at using it. So what happens when a skill is inherently tied to the body? Wings were an example, but one example was even more prominent and relevant for this improvement.

The skills Jake had received related to the Malefic Viper didn't actually alter Jake's physical body or his Soulshape, but instead simply created phantasmal body parts. These were only temporary parts of his Soulshape but It functioned similarly, even if it wasn't exactly the same.

However, one skill had permanently altered Jake's actual physical body. It was the skills that had turned his eyes from their normal brown color to a beastly yellow. It was the first legendary skill Jake had achieved that wasn't done through simply bullshitting with his Bloodline. Well, alright, he had kind of bullshitted it by buying it through a tutorial store, but still.

Jake usually only used his Gaze of the Apex Hunter to freeze foes that were difficult to fight or to simply keep them still for him to land a good blow, but today, he would use the more lethal part of it. With intense focus, Jake controlled all the energy going towards his eyes, as he almost felt the metaphysical veins going to them.

It wasn't to make the ability more powerful. Instead, it was to shield himself from doing any more damage than necessary using this skill. Was using Gaze necessary, and wouldn't it just be better to bombard them with some arcane attacks? Well, sure, but Jake wanted to use his Gaze, so he did.

He infused his eyes as they glowed yellow, and bar-none Jake released the most powerful Gaze of the Apex Predator he had ever used. The legendary skill truly showed its power as he looked at all the incoming wasps, wishing death upon them.

After a brief sting in his eyes, the sound of wings flapping in the distance suddenly lessened significantly as more than seventy percent of the swarm fell to the ground, lifeless – the remaining ones only surviving by having their bodies covered by their comrades.

Something a second Gaze quickly fixed as the last nearly seven hundred wasps also fell lifelessly to the ground, their souls destroyed by the gaze of an apex hunter.

At the same time, the ground beneath him erupted as seven huge insect-like burrowers tried to consume him. Each of them was as large as a bus with huge maws filled with teeth-like grinders. When they came up, they shot Jake into the air as the arcane bubble around him held up.

Jake let himself float upwards as he gathered mana in his hands. He also identified the newcomers

### **[Razormaw Rockshooter– lvl 151]**

Their names made a lot more sense in the next second when they all shot human-sized shards of rock towards him, but Jake simply dodged to the side as arcane bolts gathered around him. With a mental command, he released them all in a bombardment of pure death as the ground below him exploded.

He kept shooting out dozens of destructive bolts every second as the insects struggled, some of them even trying to re-burrow in the ground. Jake shot that down as he teleported down and grasped one by its tail-like limb and pulled it up again before just giving it a few good punches till it died.

“Still too easy,” Jake muttered. These enemies sucked. Straight up did. They were low-tier creatures, and Jake reckoned that most humans above level 135 or so could kill them. This was also why Gaze so easily killed them all with nearly no backlash... they were just too weak.

Jake once more pulled out the token and activated it. The environment began changing again as he now found himself standing on flat plains with nothing around him in any direction. Far off in the distance, he saw three creatures be summoned too.

They were all tall – about three to four meters - lanky with sharp claws at the end of arms practically dragging across the ground. They had not seen Jake yet from where they stood but were instead curiously inspecting their surroundings as one of them began tearing up the ground for fun.

### **[Venomclaw Kalamore – lvl 156]**

### **[Venomclaw Kalamore – lvl 155]**

### **[Venomclaw Kalamore – lvl 158]**

“Venomclaw, really?” Jake asked, wondering if that wasn’t just bullshit. Jake could clearly see that these beasts were melee-focused, so he decided to meet them head-on. He just ran towards them as he pulled out Eternal Hunger. The blade had been complaining a bit recently about being hungry, so why not feed it a bit?

As he ran over, they also spotted him. They all turned on a dime as they practically flew towards him, surpassing Jake’s own running speed. Jake met them as he stood his ground and swept his blade upwards as he met the claws of the first Kalamore and sent it flying back, its hand now dripping with blood.

Jake turned and blocked a second one as he dodged the third and weaved in between them as he swung his blade and cut one in the back. The third one attacked again, but Jake blocked it with his mana-infused gloves as he forcefully twisted its wrist and made it stab its claws into its own body.

Jake then just let one attack him as it ripped through his back and drew blood, also infusing its venom. Weak sauce venom doing little more than provide him a bit of mana regeneration as Jake decapitated one of the creatures.

The two others fell soon after, having not really managed to accomplish much. *Still too damn easy.*

He activated the token again as the environment shifted. He suddenly felt like it had gotten very hot as everything turned red. Looking up, he was now within some kind of cave with lava dripping down from the ceiling and pools of hot magma bubbling in deep pits below.

Jake was on a large circular, almost arena-like platform as someone appeared across from him.

### **[Emberblade Berserker Demon – lvl 155]**

And it truly was someone. It at least looked humanoid, but the berserker part of the name proved quite relevant fast, as Jake didn’t see much intelligence and awareness in its eyes. It was a large bulky demon wearing tattered plate armor and wielding a two-handed sword more than four meters long.

It saw him instantly and, with a bestial screech, stormed towards him as its large sword began burning and red pulsating veins that seemed to almost burn covered its body.

This was the test that marked the average member who did the test back during the trial period, but Jake was far from average.

Jake still only stood with Eternal Hunger as he allowed it to come. He blocked the first blow and found himself tossed airborne as a wave of fire licked across his body. *Outmatched in strength, huh? Makes sense.*

While still mid-air, Jake stepped down as he teleported forward, appearing right in front of the demon. He didn't give it time to respond as he stabbed his sword into his opponent, also making the blade explode with arcane energy to send the demon reeling back.

The demon flew back and was now bleeding from a hole in its chest, but at the same time, the veins also began glowing more intensely as the wound healed. Without any reprieve, the demon attacked again, slightly faster than before.

*Yep, really a stereotypical berserker. Take damage? Do more damage!*

However, Jake knew the counter to this. With a swift move, he coated his blade in his own blood to poison it and prepared for slaughter. As the demon was upon him, his body exploded in arcane energy as he released Arcane Awakening at the balanced 30%. He dodged under the first swipe of the heavy sword and cut the demon across the chest. It attacked again, but Jake just dodged and kept cutting it.

It tried to fight back, but Jake didn't let up as he kept cutting and kept stabbing. He was far faster and more agile, not allowing the demon to land a single hit. Even as the berserker grew stronger and faster, Jake just kept dodging. Towards the end, he didn't even bother attacking but re-deposited his blade in his inventory to just dodge the sword blows one after another.

In the end, the demon just fell over as it succumbed to the poison and its own wounds as Jake stood unscathed besides a few burn marks on his cloak. He deactivated Arcane Awakening again as there was no weakness period due to only using it at 30%.

"Well, should get harder now, right?" Jake said to himself and the more than a hundred observers as he activated the token again, not feeling like he needed a break.

Once more, his environment shifted as space expanded obviously enough for even Jake to notice. The cave walls were gone, and he now found himself within an expansive sky, standing on a small cloud. In front of him flew a single creature larger than anything Jake had ever fought before.

### **[Whisperleech – lvl 174]**

It looked like small banners of cloth that extended from a humongous balloon with lightning crackling within. Like a massive sky-jellyfish or something like that, but with just

ridiculous proportions. The cloth-like banners extended for more than fifty kilometers out from it as the main body was perhaps a kilometer in diameter.

Jake was amazed a creature of such size could still only be D-grade, much less have such a “low” level. Moreover, how it could feel so... unthreatening? Jake stared at it, and even when it also became aware of him and began attacking, he didn’t feel much danger.

He considered if he should take out his bow and just finish it quickly and decided that yes, that would be a good idea as he really didn’t wanna storm in and try to stab the massive creature. Primarily because he could only begin to imagine whatever goo it would spew when stabbed. He had a strong feeling it would be very disgusting.

*Let’s hope the next one is stronger.*

The chamber of judges had been quite rowdy for the first few parts of the combat test but had eventually turned quieter. That he easily passed the first test was expected. Practically everyone did, with the only ones struggling being those who were pure alchemists, having likely not even evolved their classes yet, or were of a race with close to no combat abilities.

It was in the second test something changed. It was a test to see how a testee handled being swarmed, but none had expected it to just end. A single glance and a soul attack of incredible power was released that killed nearly all of the wasps, with a second one just ending it outright.

The third fight was a slaughter. The fourth was too... but one thing stood out.

“What exactly is his class?” a projection asked after the fourth test.

“Magic and melee so far, a form of spellsword or magic warrior?” another one proposed.

“That weapon... a Legacy weapon of some sort? I feel incredible power from it,” a third one said. “Definitely not something a D-grade will usually walk around with. That curse is no joke.... Ah, perhaps that is related to his class? The soul attack also makes this probable.”

The scalekin projection did not chime in but just sat confused more than anything. The testee fought with so many different tools and methods it made little sense, but it quickly became clear he only did so for, well, fun, it appeared. He even commented out loud on the lack of challenge.

Looking over at the beastkin, who was the most powerful among them, the beastkin returned his gaze. “As I said before, he is a hunter. A hunt with unworthy prey is never interesting.”



“Thoughts on his fighting style?” the scalekin asked.

“So far, his high Perception is clear from how he fights. He predicts attacks and goes for weak points. The way he handled the demon was masterful as an evasive fighter. Overall, from what he has displayed, he would be a monstrous melee fighter or mage if he focused on that,” the beastkin explained, everyone else quiet as they listened in.

“If he focused on it?” one of the projections discussed earlier asked.

The beastkin grinned, showing his teeth. “He is a hunter, is he not? A human hunter with a high Perception. There is only one true weapon for such a man.”

“A bow?” the scalekin asked, a bit perplexed. “He has not shown any signs he uses one so far.”

“Because nothing worthy has appeared yet. A dragon does not bother wasting its Dragon Breath on unworthy foes but merely crushed it with all its other methods.”

Just as they spoke, the fifth combat test began.

“A Whisperleech? Annoying creature to deal with as a melee fighter,” a projection commented.

The human in the test looked at it a bit and waved his hand as a bow appeared.

“I told you so,” the beastkin laughed.

“We do not know if that is his most powerful method. It may merely be a more effective way to use his magi-“ a projection began but was swiftly cut off.

The human had drawn the string in the test, and instantly energy surged. He took aim and a few seconds passed before he released the string. The cloud and sky were parted as several appendages of the Whisperleech were torn apart by the arrow that soon impacted the main body resulting in a massive explosion of destructive energy.

None commented as a second shot came a few seconds later, and without the Whisperleech even being able to fight back, it was killed by only four arrows total. To make it more ridiculous...

Jake saw the huge creature collapse like an ill-engineered airship as he tsked. “Four fully charged Powershots with Arcane Awakening at 30%? Tankier than I thought, huh.”

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## Chapter 408: Meeting Expectations

Jake quickly took out the token to begin the sixth combat test. The fifth one had honestly been too easy, but then again, the huge thing was incredibly ill-matched against Jake. It just relied on being big and unapproachable, which just made a massive target for Jake.

When he activated the token, the environment shifted again. He once more found solid ground beneath him as he saw structures form all around. Within a moment, he stood within a huge colosseum of some kind more than five hundred meters across and with a magical barrier sealing him in.

A gate at the far end opened as five figures appeared. Jake frowned when he saw them.

It was five humanoids also wearing differing equipment. From what he could tell, it was two women and three men with a scalekin at the lead with a sword in hand. The ones behind were a female elf in a robe holding a staff, a human also wearing a robe, a demon in full plate armor, and a female beastkin with what looked like a rifle. Jake used Identify as he instantly understood.

**[Human – lvl 156]**

**[Elf – lvl 160]**

**[Scalekin – lvl 162]**

**[Demon – lvl 159]**

**[Beastkin – lvl 160]**

It was a battle to pit the testee against a full party of fighters - a healer, a tank, and three damage dealers able to strike at both melee and range. As Jake looked at them, they didn't speak or emote at all, but their movements were clearly that of sapient people as the healer began casting some magic that coated them all in a green aura.

Jake decided for once to not take this too casually. He had little to no experience fighting teams despite being a mid-tier D-grade, and this group was clearly one made to test his ability to handle such a group.

Arcane Awakening activated at 30% as he took out his bow right off the bat and released a barrage of explosive arrows, jumping backward. Just as he did so, the demon warrior stepped in the front and took out a shield that summoned a barrier

around its edges that expanded and totally blocked the explosions in tandem with the healer's defenses.

While jumping back, Jake began charging Arcane Powershot as he took aim for the healer of the group. The logic of always killing the healer first was a tried and true logic that he would naturally follow. The enemy gunner also returned fire as the scalekin raised his blade and exploded with some aura that left a faint sheen on the body of everyone present.

The human mage seemed to begin some ritual as a large magic seal was formed right behind him, and Jake heard some kind of chanting. There was a lot to keep track of at once, and Jake wanted to quickly seize the momentum.

He released the Arcane Powershot just before a bullet arrived from the enemy gunner. Jake quickly made a shield with his hand as the bullet impacted it and exploded in a frosty white mist, creating ice on the stable arcane barrier.

His Arcane Powershot shot forward with incredible momentum as the demon warrior once more stepped forward to block. Jake used Gaze on him as the demon froze. Annoyingly so, the scalekin warrior stepped in, and just straight-up took the arrow with his own body as he was blasted back.

It seemed like a good thing for Jake, but the healer quickly reacted as the scalekin began visibly healing. He also noticed something else... the scales on the scalekin weren't the usual kind. They had a dark green color, as Jake instantly recognized Scales of the Malefic Viper.

This was further confirmed when two black draconic wings appeared behind the scalekin as the swordsman flew towards Jake with great speed, even while injured. The demon warrior stayed with the healer, gunner, and mage as Jake only faced the swordsman scalekin in direct melee.

The healer did apply some magic first, and Jake saw the gunner begin charging some attack as the human mage continued his ritual. The demon slammed his shield into the ground as it expanded and created a physical wall between Jake and the ranged fighters. The healer could still cast through the shield, it appeared as Jake dodged away from the scalekin and bombarded the demon's protection.

It quickly became clear breaking down the barrier wouldn't be easy, forcing Jake to engage the scalekin a bit as he took out Eternal Hunger and the Bloodfeast Dagger. Green energy swirled around his opponent's blade as toxic energy bellowed out of it as the scalekin attacked.

Jake blocked with Eternal Hunger as they found themselves equally matched in strength. The poison from the blade did seep a bit into Jake, but he didn't care. The swordsman moved his blade as he tried to do a feint, but Jake blocked as he moved in

and cut with his dagger. The scalekin tried to counter, but Jake dodged under the blade as he himself attacked the swordsman's stomach, sending scales and blood flying.

*Slower than me... and compared to the Sword Saint, his swordplay seems simple*, Jake thought as he knew there had to be more.

And more there was. The scalekin suddenly exploded in power as he bulked up and grew nearly a meter in height. His muscles bulged as spikes erupted from his back, all pulsing with energy. Jake was still close and attacked his opponent but found himself blocked and slightly repelled by the post-transformation scalekin.

The two of them fought a bit more as Jake still came out on top. His opponent had gotten stronger, but not faster. However, he had also clearly gotten way bulkier and resistant as Jake's weapons didn't cut as deep as before, and the healer was also still constantly helping with healing and who-knows-what.

Ultimately though, the reason things were going as they were was that Jake allowed them to. He wanted to see what his opponents were cooking up. He had no experience fighting fights like this and wanted to take this test as a learning opportunity, as he had been told by the projection to do.

Well, this probably wasn't what the projection had meant, but hey, what can you do? Jake kept brawling with this scalekin for a while longer, occasionally throwing an arcane spell in the direction of the demon's shield until finally, the gunner and mage were ready.

The demon's shield retracted as Jake felt a surge of magic coming from the human mage. The magic seal expanded as Jake suddenly felt invisible attacks coming for him from everywhere. Like invisible chains bound his limbs, he suddenly felt himself be weighed down as he also began taking damage as it was clearly not simply a binding attack. Just then, the gunner was also ready as a giant explosion sounded out and a bullet flew towards him.

At the same time, the scalekin also closed in for an attack, with the demon even charging towards him to follow up. It was all a masterfully planned attack that would no doubt be able to kill most people in mid-tier D-grade.

Most people.

Jake opened his eyes wide as his body exploded with energy, activating Arcane Awakening fully as his stats climbed and he was flooded with power. The first attack to arrive was the scalekin, as Jake dove forward into the blow. He allowed the large swordsman to hit him in the shoulder as Jake, in turn, grasped the scalekin's arm and twisted his body – all of it happening in a moment, not giving the mage with his chains time to respond.

The huge swordsman failed to resist as Jake used the scalekin as a shield against the gunner's powerful attack. It rivaled Jake's own Arcane Powershot, which showed as the scalekin was blasted away. Jake narrowly dodged the large figure as it flew over him and smashed into the wall of the colosseum, barely making a few cracks.

As he ducked, Jake partly lost his footing as the chains dragged him down, the mage able to control them slightly. They dug in deeper as Jake felt his resources be drained, and he gritted his teeth as he was now certain it was a soul attack of some sort. It was binding his soul, not his actual physical body.

Powerful for sure, and it would make most of his level utterly unable to move. Jake, on the other hand, was a bad target. He flooded certain parts of his own Soulshape with destructive arcane energy as he weakened the chains and finally activated Scales, breaking several of the chains altogether.

He then went on the offensive. Pride of the Malefic Viper bellowed out as he used Gaze on the group. The mental attack from Pride made them all falter slightly longer, giving Jake time to draw his bow and fire an Arcane Powershot towards the healer of the group.

Jake followed up with a barrage of explosive bolts just to create chaos as he used One Step Mile forward. The healer was struck by the Arcane Powershot but managed to protect herself with a barrier in the final moment as she was sent flying back.

With two steps, Jake caught up. He had gotten an idea from seeing the scalekin hit the colosseum wall that he would now put into motion. His hand was glowing green as he summoned his wings and flew forward, catching the healer by her face after briefly breaking through her barrier with Touch.

He smashed her head into the wall with Touch of the Malefic Viper going as he dragged her across the wall in a clockwise direction, grinding her skull up against the fortified rock. The mage tried to stop him with the remaining chains, but Jake threw him another glance with Gaze as he kept flying.

The other three tried to come and help too, but Jake was too fast as he made four full revolutions around the arena within a few seconds, leaving a red line of blood around the perimeter wall. Finally, he pushed hard enough to feel the head of the healer squash.

*First down*, he thought as the notification came. Disappointingly, the notification didn't include class and profession, but what can you do?

Jake turned his attention to the four others, who were all preparing to attack him again.

"Have you guys never played any MMOs? It's a wipe when the healer dies."

The projections looked on as the slaughter of the four remaining members proceeded. It was one-sided from the start, and they had actually been a bit surprised he appeared to struggle in the beginning until it became clear he was just testing them.

"They didn't even have time to deploy more than that one tactic," one of the projections commented.

"In the end, power always wins out," another echoed.

"How many Legacy skills does he possess?" a third one asked.

"Potentially all nine," a fourth one said.

The scalekin listened on as he observed. He didn't have many comments anymore. He didn't truly question if he could beat the seventh test either. No... his question was related to what came after. "What are the chances he can do the elective level?" he asked out loud.

Glances landed on him as the beastskin spoke up. "I am voting for allowing it... I want to see him fight that monster."

Jake sat in meditation after the fight was over, taking in whatever insights he had gained. Not that there was much... in his first real attack, he had killed the healer, so yeah, that was boring. Oh, and speaking of gains: he leveled up.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 153 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 151 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\****

He had not expected it, but it was nice. For now, he was just waiting out the brief period of weakness from using Arcane Awakening. He had only used for a few minutes, but even that would take fifteen minutes or so to get back on top form. It was a nasty skill in that way.

Did he need to use it in the fight before? No, but it sure had sped things up.

An hour or so later, Jake opened his eyes as he took out the token. His resources were all replenished as he decided to move onto the seventh and final level. Check latest chapters at [movel\\*\\*fire\\*\\*.net](http://movel**fire**.net)

The environment changed as soon he found himself standing within a mountainous area not unlike one from Earth. He looked around until he saw a creature in the distance. It was a large winged form with red fur all over it. It had the body of what looked like a lion, bat-like wings, a scorpion stinger in its hind, and a face that looked

uncannily like a humanoid. Jake did remember a creature like this from somewhere, but he couldn't remember what it was called.

Luckily, he had Identify for that.

### **[Manticore – lvl 186]**

“Oh yeah... Manticore,” he muttered as he took out his bow and did something he rarely did. He retreated away from where he was as he dove into a cave not far away, but not before placing a Mark on the beast. The Manticore had clearly not seen him yet with how it flew and him not feeling its eyes upon him.

He went through the cave and out the other side as he kept track of the beast through his Mark. Jake didn't usually do this, but he wanted to get the best result possible in the test, so he didn't play around with the strongest opponent. He knew the best way to start a fight was a good opening shot from an advantageous position, so he would go for just that.

The Manticore landed on the cliff Jake had appeared at originally as it stood still for a good while, allowing Jake to move through a few caves and several kilometers away. The beast began moving again soon after but luckily went in the opposite direction.

He stalked around as he kept track of his prey, his upgraded stealth fully active. The fact that the Manticore had not spotted him already meant that it had low Perception, which was the only reason he was confident doing this.

Soon enough, he was at a good spot as he assumed the Manticore would return to where it had been. If not, he could perhaps bait it with a bit of magic or something to get its attention. He set up shop as he prepared some arrows in his quiver. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was not a possibility as this was his first time encountering a Manticore, but perhaps a mid-fight arrow could be deployed?

Jake patiently waited for the Manticore to return, and soon enough, it did. It landed on the same cliff once more, just overlooking the area. Jake had no idea what it was thinking or if it was even fully capable of thought being a weird dungeon boss and all.

With his prey in position, he took a deep breath as he expanded the stealth field made by Arcane Stealth slightly to try and cover up what he was about to do. He nocked a poisoned arrow as he began channeling Arcane Powershot, also using Arcane Awakening with the destructive part embraced as his offensive stats were boosted by 50%.

He was still unnoticed when he ten seconds later released his shot.



Returning to tested tactics, Jake froze the Manticore with Gaze the moment it noticed his arrow, making it unable to respond in time as it was hit in the back. The truck-sized beast was sent flying back as blood spewed all over, but it soon began stabilizing itself.

Just in time for another Arcane Powershot to hit it and blast it back again before it had time to fully get its bearings as Jake didn't hold anything back.

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## Chapter 409: Extra Credits Hydra

Manticores were sure interesting creatures. Clearly pretty powerful for their levels based on how well the one Jake fought handled things. They even had mouth magic that impressed Jake as it could both breathe fire and shoot a beam of pure energy.

However, the most impressive was the stinger by far. Anything it hit was instantly petrified and turned to stone, and it could even shoot a weaker version of this effect out as bullets of petrifying poison. Physically it was also monstrosly strong, and even if it was a bit slow, it made up for it with its bulky build and ranged attacks.

Overall it was pretty strong. Jake at least looked back at the fight as a good time as he sat in meditation with the half-decayed corpse of the Manticore right behind him. It had taken him a while, but ultimately, it didn't even stand a chance. Jake had dominated from start to end and just kept a distance throughout as he slowly poisoned it to death before finally finishing it off with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

While it had an okay poison resistance, it only seemed to work against its own petrifying poison, so it wasn't really that great. Ultimately Jake could have won even without poisons... even if poison did account for far more than half of his overall damage – with it only increasing the longer a fight goes on.

As Jake sat there in meditation, the projection popped up in front of him.

“Congratulations on passing the combat test with flying colors,” the scalekin said with a genuine tone of respect. “I can't remember seeing such a dominant performance for a long time.”

“Does that mean I get a good grade?” Jake asked, hopefully. He didn't know what the criteria were, and he did actually feel a bit cheated as he had been unable to truly show what he was capable of. Combined with his alchemy performance, this should result in an okay overall grade. At least he hoped so.

“Naturally,” the projection confirmed.

“Good,” Jake said with a smile. “Because I feel like it wasn’t *that* hard, you know?”

The scalekin returned his smile. “That brings us to the next topic... with this combat encounter done, the test is technically over. However, due to your performance in the combat portion, there is an eighth elective test you can choose to partake in.”

Jake instantly became alert. “Something even stronger? Wait, does this mean the alchemy portion also had an extra test if I performed well enough there?”

“Yes, but needless to say, your performance in alchemy was not good enough for that. This extra test will be a large step-up from those prior, and as always, you will risk true death if you fail. Are you interested?” the projection asked.

Jake found the question almost insulting. “Of course.”

“Very well. This test will be combat like those prior but last at most a total of one hour. This means that if you are on the losing end, it merely becomes a game of survival, yet at the same time also a test of your ability to deal damage and kill your foe within the allotted time. Trust me, it may seem easy with an hour, but what you will fight is not a simple creature,” the projection said gravely before continuing.

“What you will face will be the incarnation of the Lord Protector himself back when he was only a mid-tier D-grade. A beast of relatively low intelligence back then, but incredible might that swept across his planet as he devoured everything in his path. I am certain you know of the Lord Protector, correct?”

“A little bit, but a refresher would be nice? Been a few eras, and our understandings may vary,” Jake said honestly. Being ignorant was not being a heretic, was it?

“Very well. The Lord Protector was – and still is – a Hydra. I assume you know what a Hydra is?”

Jake nodded in confirmation, assuming it was the same kind of Hydra he knew about.

“Hydras are notoriously survivable and difficult to kill due to certain racial bonuses and a high base health pool and regeneration that amplifies further with every head. As for the Lord Protector? At D-grade, he was merely a two-headed Hydra – the one you will face - but as he grew, so did his power and number of heads, as is customary. A nine-headed Hydra at C-grade, hundred-headed Hydra by B-grade, thousand-headed Hydra at A-grade, and the ten thousand-headed Hydra at S-grade. At godhood? Counting the number of heads once he assumes his true form is meaninglessness incarnate.”

Jake wanted to comment on how a thousand or even worse ten-thousand heads was even possible, but that would certainly be heretic-territory, right? Like... was the main

body just a big ball of flesh with heads coming out like hair? Just a big squid thing? Or... was the body just so massive it could facilitate it? No, that would just mean the heads were smaller. Was there even a real body... perhaps the heads did not exist in the physical plane all at once? It was impossible to know, but Jake really wanted to see.

"However... I have one warning. You have just achieved level 151, which means the one you will face will be level 160. The saved copies of the Lord Protector come in ten-level intervals, and as the test does not allow you to face those lower-level... you will have a steep hill to climb. Let me say this now, if you find yourself on the losing end, just buy time and wait it out," the projection warned with sincere advice. Advice Jake would actually take if it came down to it.

Maybe... who knows? That sounded like a problem he would handle if it ever became pertinent.

"I will keep it in mind," Jake said.

The projection nodded as it summoned a new token. "Use this when you are ready for the final test... and good luck."

"Thanks," Jake said as the scalekin projection disappeared. He closed his eyes again and entered meditation as he thought to himself: *Time to see what Villy's mate Snappy was like back in the day.*

Vilastromoz went over some notes as he made a selection to be sent to the Humanoid Resources department. Under an alias, of course. They couldn't know it was from him, but he was already smiling at what would soon happen.

"Jake is about to fight Snoarix's Legacy Incarnation within the trial," Duskleaf said, a bit nervous.

"Yep," the Viper answered. "Gonna be fun."

"Thoughts?"

"That it is gonna be fun. Well, only for Jake, Snappy wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed back then despite having multiple heads," Vilastromoz joked.

"But he was powerful... I have seen quite a few reach this stage before, and it nearly always ends with the testee forced to flee to survive or dead. Knowing Jake... he won't flee, no matter how easy doing so will be for him," Duskluaif argued.

"Well, I guess he will just have to win then," the Viper shrugged.

Did Vilastromoz think it would be easy? No, of course not. Snappy was a freaking monster even back then. But then again... so was Jake. Snappy did also have some glaring weaknesses, at least on the offensive front.

There was just one little issue.

“However... it sure is a bad matchup.”

Jake looked at the token a bit, tossing it up and down before he made his decision and activated it. He had fully regenerated and was in the best shape possible, so if there was a time to fight a Hydra, it was now. The environment changed again, just like every other time. The ground beneath him turned mushy as he felt it soften, with the moisture in the air spiking.

*A swamp.*

Thick gnarly trees sprung up as a bit of water covered the ground everywhere. Jake even saw in his Sphere that the shallow water hid pits here and there. His senses spread, and instantly he picked up on an aura quite a bit away. A powerful one.

Jake once more entered stealth, not fucking around. He was fighting a D-grade nine levels above himself that had become a god, after all. Moreover, it was a Hydra... Hydras were not to be fucked with if mythology had anything to say, even if this one only had two heads.

Sneaking forward, Jake made his way through the deep roots springing up from the trees, the trees themselves lifted and raised so one could hide underneath. He kept low as he followed his senses. Soon, he saw something rise in the distance.

A head. Get full chapters from *novel✕fire✕net*

It rose far above the treetops, making the creature easily fifteen to twenty meters tall. Jake got closer and finally found a spot where he could get an okay-ish look at the Hydra. It had dark gray scales and spiky scales covering its body, feet like a dragon, and two necks far larger than its bulky body. A long tail was behind it, and the heads themselves looked like snakes, except their mouths looked almost too big.

The Hydra was currently digging something out from beneath the ground, ignorant to Jake's presence as it seemed to just swallow up the earth and water to create a large pit, opening its maws like an excavator. Jake finally used Identify to see exactly what he was dealing with.

### **[Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption – lvl 160]**

*That's quite the mouthful*, Jake thought, not just speaking of how the Hydra had just chugged down a few tons of soil. Then again, he had a profession with an equally long

name, and it wasn't like his class name was short either. As for this particular name... perennial consumption did sound like it was something a high-tier creature would have.

Now, Jake did not know much about Hydras, but he did know a lot about scaled beasts in general, and he truly believed they were similar enough to meet the criteria... which proved true as he began summoning an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter within his quiver.

He stayed hidden as he did this, no energy leaking out. Before activating the token, he had already prepared poisoned arrows in the quiver, so he was good to go. Now he just needed a good vantage point to attack from.

Jake used Mark on the Hydra as he snuck away to the far corner of the swamp. There was no way for the Hydra to detect his Mark as he stealthily made his exit with his high Perception. He went nearly twenty kilometers away over the next ten minutes before he stopped in a nice and open area. Some quick maths confirmed he had a good angle as Jake took out his bow and also took out the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

He poisoned it and nocked the huge arrow. It looked more like a black metal spear with a drill-pike head. Certainly looked well-made to penetrate scales. Jake drew his bow as he took aim, closing his eyes meanwhile. Being able to see or not had no advantage here. Instead, he would go solely by instinct.

Jake lifted his bow at a very upwards angle as he breathed in. Arcane Awakening activated with the destructive boost as Arcane Powershot began charging. Everything was ready as Jake opened his eyes and released the string.

He quickly nocked a new arrow as he shot at a slightly different angle after a fast Arcane Powershot to give it good speed. This repeated as Jake fired a dozen or so arrows more, the first eight stable ones and the last four destructive.

When the last arrow was shot, he quickly took out a mana potion to consume as he ran away from his original position to not instantly get found out. Making his way to a new vantage point, Jake felt the first arrow hit right on target as his Mark was suddenly infused with a lot of arcane energy, and Sense of the Malefic Viper made him aware that the Hydra was now poisoned.

His plan now was to find a new spot to fire from, but as he made his way forward, he felt something wrong. After Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter hit, he felt only two more impact on his Mark, despite the Hydra not moving. *It blocked it?*

No... that also felt wrong. The poison on the arrows was something he could usually feel even at such a distance, but now it was just gone. Destroyed completely. As he wondered, the Hydra finally began moving. It ran towards the direction he had shot from for a moment before it suddenly changed course – headed straight for Jake.

Jake instantly knew the Hydra was aware of his position as it beelined for him. It moved fast, crossing more than two hundred meters every second as Jake took to the air and decided to use the distance to his advantage. He flew upwards for half a kilometer as he looked down and saw trees topple in the distance.

A path of carnage was being carved, and Jake saw the massive Hydra stomp towards him with heavy steps. It was bleeding from its back where Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had hit, but Jake also saw it already healing.

Two more stable arrows stuck out of its thick scales on one of the necks, with the other arrows gone. Jake nocked an arrow and fired another Arcane Powershot towards his target.

Jake watched as the arrow flew for one of the Hydra heads, as it responded in an unexpected way. It opened its mouth and ate the Arcane Powershot like it was a tasty snack. Its head did recoil a little as it shook it, but it didn't stop running for even a moment.

"So that's where all the other arrows went..." Jake muttered

He had a feeling this wasn't going to be an easy fight. Something that was confirmed as the Hydra opened its mouth towards him. He felt energy gather, but not the energy he had expected. Pink-purple mana came out of the Hydra's maw as a beam of pure destructive force was fired towards Jake.

A beam of arcane mana.

Jake's arcane mana.

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## Chapter 410: Beast vs Man

Jake hastily dodged the arcane beam but was still scratched by it due to its intense destructive power. The remnant energies burned his cloak as Jake felt his left arm singe a little as some of his own damn affinity invaded his body and did damage.

Gritting his teeth, Jake returned fire as he switched it up. The arrow split into five in mid-air as the Hydra only managed to swallow one of them as the four others hit and exploded on its scales. The Hydra roared in anger as it did something Jake had not expected. It stopped and just stared up at Jake, who was flying far above.

Deciding to just shoot again, Jake released another barrage of Splitting Arrow, but this time when the Hydra opened its mouth, something else happened. It was as if space itself distorted when the Hydra breathed in, and all five arrows were swallowed whole as the Hydra didn't even react besides closing its maw and staring back up at him with both heads.

Waiting.

Jake hesitated for a moment, unsure how to proceed. The Hydra looked relatively calm, too, just staring up at him with one head as the other began scavenging the ground. That is when Jake realized something... the one-hour timer wasn't just for Jake's advantage. It was as much for the Hydra, forcing the participant to actually fight.

As it was right now, Jake could just stay up in the air for a good hour and leave the test. The Hydra clearly didn't bother with him more than necessary, and the problem was that Jake couldn't see why it should. This stalemate was only to its advantage, even discounting the timer the Hydra probably wasn't even aware of.

It was just healing as it stood there, and the poison within it was slowly being eliminated. Jake knew he had to do something, so he did. He nocked another arrow as he fired a barrage of stable arrows down. The Hydra swallowed them again with one of its heads, not even bothering to raise the second one from the ground.

Jake shot again as it repeated. For the third shot, the Hydra was just about to swallow as Jake used Gaze of the Apex Hunter, freezing it for a moment. The arrow hit it straight in its mouth, sending blood flying and poison down its throat before it became able to move again.

Finally, he did something to get its undivided attention. Jake shot again, but it swallowed once more. Jake kept going as it now kept swallowed active for longer and used it early too, likely to avoid him repeating the attack. Little did it know Jake would pop his eyes out of his sockets before he could kill the Hydra using Gaze and Powershot or Splitting Arrow.

His current hope was that the Hydra couldn't keep using that swallowing ability infinitely. He even managed to make it swallowed even more regularly when he sent a directed mist of poison from Wings of the Malefic Viper down towards it. His hope was high for a bit as he saw it swallow nearly constantly while still having a tinge of poison infect it.

A hope that died within ten or so minutes as it just kept going doing the same shit. Perhaps he shouldn't have bet on something with Perennial Consumption in its name to become unable to absorb within an hour... Follow current novels on

Jake gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath. He had yet to take any real damage at all, yet he felt like he was losing. The damn two-headed lizard was just staring up at



him, a bit more mad than before. It at least gave him the attention of both heads now. Sure, it sometimes fired his own damn magic back at him, but that never hit.

It probably could fly, Jake reckoned... all D-grades had the basic energy control to do that. But why would it? Jake was just someone annoyingly firing arrows, and from the looks of it, it tolerated his presence for one reason only:

It liked his mana. After a good barrage of arrows, he saw it smack its mouth in satisfaction, which infuriated him. Jake was just burning his own resources at this point, even if he had been smart to downgrade Arcane Awakening to the balanced 30%.

Sighing, Jake decided to change things up again. He began flying downwards as he landed on a tree in the marsh. The Hydra looked towards him, not even moving to attack as Jake was a few kilometers away from the creature that towered over him.

When ranged fails, one turns to melee.

Jake stepped down as he charged forward with both wings leaving a trail of poison. The Hydra, surprisingly enough, didn't use the swallowed ability. Instead, it attacked simply by snapping forward, trying to gobble him down whole.

He easily dodged it as he took out Eternal Hunger and the Bloodfeast dagger. He flew past the snapping head as he cut the Hydra's long neck with Eternal Hunger, releasing a spurt of blood. The second head then came down on Jake even faster than the first, forcing him to retreat.

Jake quickly poisoned both weapons as he dove in again. The two heads kept snapping forward like two snakes trying to tear him apart, making it difficult to get close. After a minute or so dancing back and forth, Jake got an opening as he used One Step Mile and dove between the creature's legs, cutting it along its belly as he used One Step Mile again just in time. The huge monster slammed down where he had just been, sending water and mud flying everywhere as a few of the marsh trees fell over all around them.

Turning, he tossed a few bolts of mana, but the Hydra swallowed again as it ate both up. By now, Jake was certain... the swallowed ability only worked on mana or at least energy-based attacks. Jake moved forward again as he wanted to press his advantage, but the moment he got close, the Hydra opened one of its maws towards the sky and roared.

For a moment, Jake felt his entire body tense up as he froze in place, just as the second head came down upon him. Jake barely managed to activate Gaze on the Hydra as both of them just stood frozen for less than a second before they both moved again.

Jake dodged away as the Hydra slammed its head down, getting a mouthful of the marsh as Jake went in close again. A clawed foot flew up as it raised a leg to kick him,

but Jake was fast and blocked it with the Bloodfeast dagger as he plunged Eternal Hunger into the Hydra's leg.

He was still knocked back due to the sheer difference in size and bulk, but he hadn't taken any damage as he landed on the shallow water. He got a good look at the Hydra and could only frown. He had made a few wounds... but they were just pricks with a toothpick to the large Hydra. The poison did help a little, but he would have to do more.

Even if this wasn't timed, Jake frankly wasn't confident. But all he could do for now was try and mount the pressure, so he attacked once more as he only managed to land a weak blow every few seconds while dodging the snapping maws. This was only with two heads, and Jake could only imagine how fucked it would be to fight one with nine.

Jake was surprised at one thing, though: how few methods the Hydra appeared to have. It was just a massive creature with incredibly high stats and bulk, but nothing really besides its ability to swallow energy and that roar.

Was that really all there was to such a monstrous creature? Then again... did it need more? Probably not, but Jake still felt like there was a small chance for one reason: stacking damage. With every strike of his weapon, he infected it with poison, and with every arcane attack he managed to sneak in, the Arcane Charge from Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter grew.

He even began to use other methods as he got more comfortable. Blood of the Malefic Viper spewed out as he cut himself purposefully, and the mist from his wings also still hung in the air. Occasionally, the Hydra did consume some of it, and it even fired a breath of toxic mist back at him, but Jake easily managed.

Jake got a bit riskier as he pushed himself to inflict more wounds. He had seen the attack patterns and could predict them by now. It was still questionable if he could make it with the timer, but if it went as it did now, it should be manageable. As long as the Hydra didn't change up the game and-

He fucking jinxed it.

The Hydra suddenly changed as it did something Jake had not seen coming. It retreated a bit away, growled, and then slowly began shrinking.

Jake quickly pulled out his bow to attack, seeing a chance, but the Hydra could still use its consume-ability while reducing in size. Instead, he quickly charged in and attacked but was frozen by a roar, followed by a second roar functioning more like a pure shockwave, sending him flying back. Unharmful, but having missed an opening.

When he finally got ready to attack again, the situation had changed. The Hydra had shrunk to only be around four to five meters tall, even with its heads, and its body had

turned into a darker gray than before. All wounds were still there, and so were the poison and Arcane Charge. But he still got a bad feeling.

One would think that size was always beneficial in a fight, but not in every case. Like the Thunder Roc – the first D-grade Jake killed besides the King – size could become a demerit. One the Hydra had fixed by reducing itself in size.

Now, if this was all it had done, Jake was still confident. The problem is... it wasn't.

The Hydra charged, its four clunky limbs suddenly seeming nimble and agile. It reached him within moments as a head flew forward. Jake was forced to block as he held up both weapons and was knocked backward.

*Way fucking faster, Jake thought as he landed and skid across the ground, both arms hurting. But also physically weaker? Or the same, but just less mass behind every blow?*

It charged again, but this time Jake was ready as he sidestepped the first head, only to see himself faced with the second. He blocked it and prepared to attack as the first head twisted around and came for him again. Dodging once more, he barely managed to swing the Bloodfeast Dagger at the neck before the second head attacked again, again.

Jake exploded with arcane mana as he launched himself back to not get entangled by the two snapping heads. Seeing the narrow wound left by the dagger made him frown. Its scales and underneath hide were both way tougher. The Hydra's transformation skill was not merely size control but size compression, so even if it had made it less weighty, its stats appeared to have improved.

It wasn't like reducing to a third its size made the Hydra three times faster and tougher, but it sure wasn't an insignificant improvement. And if he was honest, the scales were close to three times more resilient now than before.

The Hydra attacked once more, and soon Jake was forced to push Arcane Awakening to 60% just to keep up, putting himself on yet another countdown. He gritted his teeth as he tried to figure out patterns, but so far, the only reason he still had his head was due to his precognitive dodging abilities granted by his Bloodline.

One thing was certain... even with all his boosts, Jake was slower, weaker, and less resilient than his opponent, and moreover, his archery was near-nullified. It was frustrating. Jake had even summoned his own scales just to get a bit more physical resistance, but one thing differed significantly between Hydra scales and dragon scales.

If a dragon scale was the bane of all magic, then a hydra scale was the bane of all physical attacks. There was a reason why hydras and dragons were often compared in

mythology. Both were absolute monsters and high-tier beings. Snappy in front of him being an apex hydra.

Meanwhile, Jake was just a human. An all-rounder.

For the first time... Jake reconsidered that choice he had made when he evolved to D-grade. The choice of not becoming a Malefic Dragonkin. He did not hold a shadow of doubt in his mind; it would have given him a stronger and more monstrous body. It would have made him half-monster, and Jake was certain monsters had a lot of benefits to make them stronger. He even had a theory their stats counted for more when it came to things like getting health points, and surely toughness made hide and scales tougher than Jake's useless human skin.

What did being a human give him? The claws of the Malefic Dragonkin could still use his bow, and meanwhile, he would also have claws... he would have fangs. Maybe it made sense humans were just worse off in purely bodily strength?

A human could never beat a bear in battle pre-system, right?

In the fight, Jake was once more blasted back as he tried to dodge but was frozen by a roar. His arm got torn up, and he flew several hundred meters through the air before finally hitting a tree and smashing it into pieces, sending large splinters flying into the marsh water.

Jake just felt more and more frustrated. This wasn't like the Sword Saint using some Transcendent skill... it wasn't a master swordsman. It was a dumb beast – no offense to the current Snappy.

As he pushed himself up, his hand caught onto something as he pulled it up. It was a wooden stick that had broken from the tree earlier, giving it a sharp edge. Like that of a spear. Jake looked at it a bit as the Hydra made its way over slowly, not bothering to quickly give chase.

It was just healing rapidly anyway due to being a damn Hydra anyway, right?

Looking at the stick, Jake suddenly had a flashback to his childhood. He didn't know where it came from, but when he looked at the stick and then back at the approaching beast, it just popped into his head.

It was when he was maybe six or seven years old? He remembered going to a museum with his parents and Caleb, looking at things from the ice age. Jake vividly remembered looking at a display of seven hunters standing before a felled mammoth.

Jake remembered asking his dad how the hunters had won. He didn't understand how a few small humans could beat a beast even larger than an elephant. To his young mind,

it just didn't make sense. His dad had tried to explain as an attendant had helped to provide an answer that had stuck in Jake's head.

"Humans may not be strong and big like mammoths. We may not have the same natural weapons as they do, but we have something else: the ability to pick up nearly anything and make it into a weapon just as good if not better. So even if humans don't have fangs or tusks... we can make our weapons. That is why humans are the true apex predators: we always find a way."

Jake looked at the stick as the Hydra got closer, and he felt an odd response from a skill he had not expected.

**Requirments met.**

**Do you wish to experience the forming of a High-Record Fragment related to the path of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2**

**Warning, experiencing a High-Record Fragment will consume 2 charges.**

He didn't even know what skill it was for or if it was only related to one skill related to the Viper, but he had a feeling. Without hesitating, he accepted, disappearing just as the Hydra was about to set upon him.

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## Chapter 411: A Legendary Warrior

Right away, Jake knew this time was different than any prior. The feeling he got was one not from a perspective... it was one where he was purely an observer of the world - of everything that happened. He was not bound by the figures in the Records but merely a historian gazing upon it as he experienced reality as it once was. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT *novel♦fire♦net*

Before him was a vast wasteland of red rock, stretching infinitely into the distance. Pillars of sizes incomprehensible to him marked the surface. On top of two of these pillars stood figures, each spread thousands of kilometers apart, yet they spoke as if they were right next to one another.

"You really don't know when to surrender, do you?" one of the figures said. It was a primarily black dragon but with a dark green sheen to its scales. Spikes of pure power

covered its spine as it had a lithe form, yet it still looked more powerful than ever. It was only about twenty meters long, and Jake guessed this was a purposefully smaller form.

This was Jake's first time seeing the Malefic Viper in this form. This was clearly an evolved form of the B-grade dragon, but based on the sheer difference and aura, Jake reckoned this wasn't A-grade anymore but a fully-fledged S-grade being. Late S-grade, based on his instincts.

Across from him stood a man. Just a regular human from the looks of it with a half-burnt beard, his armor was broken now, making him wear little more than a loincloth and a simple-looking axe in his hand. It looked worse than the average one from any hardware store as it was rusty and chipped.

Needless to say, this man wasn't just a regular human despite his looks. He gave off an aura of an S-grade, but one quite a bit weaker than the Malefic Viper. Perhaps he was only mid-tier S-grade? Jake wasn't sure, but he had a strong feeling that was the case.

This man breathed heavily as he looked around him. "Damn, everyone else just left like that?" he muttered.

"It appears that to them, failure of the event was preferable to death. A logical choice you seem to not comprehend," the Malefic Viper answered.

"Bah, why leave when I still got fight left in me!?" he said with a huge grin.

The Malefic Viper looked down on the human as a scoff resounded through the empty wasteland. "You humans and your hubris. Forever ignorant of how inferior you are. You don't seriously think you can win, so disappear from my sight. I have wasted enough time on you already, you cockroach."

Just after those words were said, the sky suddenly parted as light bathed the entire wasteland. A golden orb descended from out of nowhere, giving off an aura that almost made Jake's mouth water. He couldn't identify it... but he was certain this was something special. An artifact? Natural Treasure? No matter what, it was what these two were there fighting for.

However, only the Malefic Viper looked up towards it as the human kept his eyes trained on the dragon before him.

"As every other human fell, only one stood before the evil black dragon that had terrorized the human race... despite how injured and how much weaker he was, he refused to back down and eventually managed to beat back this evil. Isn't that a good story? One the bards will sing songs of for ages to come?" the bearded man said as a laugh as he lifted his axe and threw it over his shoulder.

“A better tale is how the stupid human was killed by the dragon as he was too moronic to know when to quit,” the Viper said, still looking up towards the orb. The treasure was still sealed, but soon it would be released.

“I like my version better,” the human shrugged.

Finally, the Viper bothered to regard the human again. “If you want to die that badly, be my guest.”

With that, the entire wasteland suddenly turned dark green as intense mana gathered. The human responded as a golden aura emanated from him, protecting him. “Come! Let us make a legend of the ages!” he yelled as he took the initiative and flew over with speed that may as well have been teleportation.

Jake could only keep up due to the special state allowed by Path of the Heretic-Chosen, but he was still shocked as they impacted each other. A claw met the axe as a shockwave was released, tumbling thousands of pillars all around them as a crater formed underneath – the only unaffected thing being the golden orb floating above.

The clash had an obvious winner as the human was sent flying back, leaving a trail of blood as his shoulder was torn up. He instantly attacked again but was repelled as hundreds of dark green orbs of mana formed and fired beams towards him.

Yet he refused to give up as he managed to dodge them and continue his assault. The golden aura around him only intensified as he got slightly faster for every moment, and soon he managed to reach the Viper again.

They clashed once more as the winner remained clear. Jake observed intently as the claw and axe impacted one another, and Jake noted how the claw of the Viper seemed to inherently infuse poison into every blow, and he felt oddly familiar energy from the claw. Fang of the Malefic Viper... in the claw? Jake investigated this as he also kept following the battle.

The man was pushed back as another wound appeared on his arm, with the poison also seeping in. With every clash, the difference in power was obvious, and yet Jake got an odd feeling as he watched. The Viper was dominant and menacing, an absolute powerhouse with an aura that made him seem supreme, Yet...

Jake couldn't see the axe warrior lose.

It was truly odd and confusing to him. The power difference was there, wounds were accumulating, yet the axe warrior just kept going – the grin on his face not fading for even a second no matter what happened. It was as if not a single fiber of his being even viewed losing as a possibility.



The battle between the two S-grades looked simple, but the destruction they wrought was earth-shattering. The Viper was superior in every way, even if magic seemed to be his forte. Meanwhile, the human just swung his axe in a straightforward way. There was no profound feeling like when Jake fought the Sword Saint. In fact, the S-grade seemed less skilled in using a weapon than the old man.

But he just had a presence to him. One that just kept growing with every moment. Jake then felt like the fight sped up. Flashes of the two clashing repeatedly dominated his mind as the situation progressed. The golden orb that they were fighting for also intensified with every passing second as they both fought.

Time suddenly returned to normal as in a huge clash, the human was sent barreling backward as the Viper followed up with a breath of pure dark green energy. The man barely managed to block but was still smashed into the ground as a huge green pulsing crater formed.

The man got up as his golden aura was still strong, but just as he looked stable, he coughed out black blood as he fell to his knees. The poison was getting to him.

“Even a cockroach has its limits, it seems,” the Malefic Viper said. While the warrior was injured and bloody, he himself barely had a few chipped scales. “You humans never fail to amaze me. So fragile and so inferior, yet you keep trying. It is almost cute.”

“Bah, what does an overgrown lizard have to brag about?” the warrior answered as he managed to stand up.

The Viper stared at the man with contempt as he briefly tossed the orb above a look. “A human so old, yet so ignorant. Creatures and races of the system exist on a spectrum, and on that spectrum, so-called “overgrown lizards” are on another league than you pathetic humans. You are merely fodder for the progress of those competent enough to evolve away from their feeble humanoid forms.”

“Sounds like something an overgrown lizard would think,” the man said as he laughed. He raised his fist and slapped his own chest as he grinned. “But this right here? This is perfection.”

Jake wasn't sure if the guy was referring to his ripped chest or his race as a human, but the man looked confident either way.

“Skin that tears at the slightest touch, hands with nails unable to cut even the lightest of hide, teeth not made for killing a single creature. Before the system, your race could barely walk without hurting themselves. You have nothing that makes you-“

“I got this!” the man said as he raised his axe.

“A weapon? So what? Is the result not clear already?”

“And this!” the warrior also said, pointing to the broken scraps of armor still on his body. “I got everything I need already!”

The Viper looked at him, and Jake was certain that what the Viper was doing was just waiting for the orb above to become claimable. Moreover, the poison within the man was still spreading and slowly whittling him down.

“I do recognize humans have value as a collective. But you are makers, not destroyers. Your purpose is to uplift those who break the shackles of humanity and ascend. Those who toss away their inferior forms. Why else do you think you humans have professions?”

“I dunno,” the man just honestly answered as he lifted his axe. “But I do know I don’t need any of that lizard crap. I got everything I’ll ever need right here!”

The axe began glowing with energy, but the Viper didn’t bother. To him, the fight was already a foregone conclusion. So... he decided to finish it.

“A pity. You are the strongest human I have ever met, despite your shortcomings. Now die, proud to be killed by a superior being,” the Viper said as the entire environment changed. Jake felt the activation of what he guessed was Pride as well as several other skills that all created a domain.

Then, he charged, clearly insistent on killing the man using his superior physique. The man responded as he lifted his glowing axe and charged. Axe met claw as they were knocked away from each other again, something that clearly surprised the Viper.

“As all others have fallen, a single man dared challenge the evil dragon,” the warrior spoke as he charged. The golden aura around him intensified even more as he released power that Jake had no idea where came from.

“A hero of the day,” he yelled loudly as for the first time, the Viper lost out in a clash. **“A legend forever.”**

Jake just looked on as he saw the man’s gaze and felt something he had never expected. Something straight from his Bloodline as he felt it hum to life upon looking at another human. It was not a feeling of wanting to challenge him or one of fear... but one of pure recognition.

At that moment, Jake knew who the winner would be. The Malefic Viper was a monster many levels above the axe warrior, yet that inkling the man wouldn’t lose only amplified as his golden aura intensified. From the man’s gaze, he didn’t believe losing was even a possibility either.

The Viper was what Jake could only describe as flabbergasted as he was pushed back and a few scales broke. The dragon clearly saw and felt this as he was enraged. The Viper roared as he flew forward, smashing the man flying, but it was only momentary.

"I don't need any fancy claws."

The axe descended as the Viper bit forward. They clashed as the human was blasted away, leaving a trail of blood. But at the same time, the Viper roared in pain as a fang had been broken and thrown to the ground far below.

"I don't need any scales."

His body pulsed with golden power as he lifted his axe again and chopped. The Viper responded as he released a blast of magic, knocking the man back before snapping forward with insane speed as his neck seemed to stretch. The man dodged, but he was still hit partly and smashed down onto the ground as a claw came.

The Viper roared as he released a Dragon's Breath straight down at the pinned man. He managed to raise his axe as he shouted in response, the axe glowing gold. It released a glow that managed to block the breath for a few moments before suddenly his weapon exploded in a golden light, beating back the Viper.

"There goes your axe," the Viper said as he stabilized.

The human managed to stand as his one arm was gone, entirely eroded away, and his entire body was half-decayed, showing bone. Yet the golden aura hummed stronger than ever.

The human looked down and saw a fragment of the broken fang of the Viper he had smashed off before. He picked it up as the dragon scoffed, but he still spoke.

"I don't need my axe."

He raised the fang as energy went into it and carved it into the rough shape of an axe. It almost conformed to his will as he looked towards the Viper with bloodshot eyes. "I just need whatever the hell I can get my hands on."

His body erupted as he charged forward faster than ever before. He swung with his one good arm. The Viper blocked, but his barrier magic was shattered as blood and scales spewed out. The axe warrior cut again as the Viper was sent flying, but the dragon barely managed to stabilize before he was hit with the follow-up.

At that moment, Jake felt panic. For the first time, the Viper felt fear towards the monster he was facing. He tried everything as magic collected, but nothing worked.

"I am not merely a human!"

The words echoed as the man cut down and ripped away a large chunk of flesh.

“I am a warrior!”

He hit again as the Viper was pushed back, and the golden aura covered the horizon.

“I am a legend!”

He swung as the Viper’s maw of teeth was broken.

**“I am Valdemar!”**

A crack resounded as the spine of the dragon broke.

**“AND THIS!”**

He pulled back the broken axe-shaped fang as it pulsed with energy that formed a massive golden axe.

**“IS THE FANG!”**

He swung as the world trembled and the ground cracked. The orb above shuddered as reality itself was cleaved in half, revealing the void between universes.

**“OF MAN!”**

The Viper was nearly cut in two as his chest was cleaved open, and a torrent of blood flooded the landscape.

At that moment, Jake felt the usual feeling of Path of the Heretic Chosen as he suddenly became one with the Viper. He felt the fear and reluctance as a skill was used. The two broken wings on his back instantly returned as phantasmal versions appeared and burned with green energy.

The entire broken body of the Viper turned green as suddenly his whole form shot into the distance, and Jake felt the many concepts interact as space itself parted, and the Viper disappeared.

Having fled a battle to save his own life.

Yet the thing that dominated Jake’s minds was the words of the man Valdemar. Another Primordial and future founder and leader of Valhal.

*Fang of man...*

Time rewound as Jake returned to the beginning again.

“You really don’t know when to surrender, do you?”

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## Chapter 412: Fangs of Man

Jake watched the battle again, this time already knowing the outcome, allowing him to focus on aspects he hadn’t before. He observed their clashes and primarily the Viper as he kept a close eye on the claws and the poison running through them at all times.

He focused on the axe warrior and his indomitable will.

On the way that the Viper used all his skills and manipulated magic.

He focused on everything he could as time rewound again after the Viper escaped, as Jake once more intimately experienced the escape skill related to Wings of the Malefic Viper. Soon after the escape skill was used, time rewound as Jake experienced everything again.

This happened a dozen times as the Path of the Heretic Chosen skill stayed active longer than ever before. Perhaps it was due to it consuming two attempts, or maybe it was due to the way this attempt worked, but either way, it allowed Jake to learn more than before.

Fang and Wings were the two skills truly in focus, yet Jake felt like he learned just as much from Valdemar as he did the Viper. The man was what Jake could only describe as inspirational. His utter aura of dominance and willpower that didn’t allow a single trace of doubt to enter his mind, as well as skills that synergized with this, made him an absolute monster. He truly never made a move believing it wouldn’t work or fight, believing he couldn’t win. Was this delusional? Perhaps... but it clearly worked for him.

He was the epitome of a warrior despite not necessarily being the most skilled fighter from a technical point of view. Every attack was infused with every fragment of his will, and every atom of his body radiated battle intent. Jake was in awe the more he looked on, but sadly the period of the skill was soon over.

A final time he experienced traveling with Wings as he focused on it, but he felt he was still a distance away from fully comprehending it. In fact, he had learned a lot more related to Fangs as he felt he was just on the cusp of comprehension.

But then something changed. Jake flew away with the Viper, but instead of time rewinding or the vision ending, Jake was returned to Valdemar and the golden orb. The axe warrior's weapon had broken from that final strike as he stood unarmed and looked up at the orb as he breathed heavily.

Then he took out a bottle from some spatial inventory and opened it. He went over to a pool of the Viper's blood as he poured the liquid from the bottle out onto it.

"Cheers, mates, first drink's on you guys. I bloody won," he said as he took a whisk of the bottle himself, and to Jake's amazement, his wounds stopped festering soon after as he stabilized himself from all the poison in his body. It wasn't a healing potion or an antidote he had drank but alcohol so fucking pure it washed out and neutralized much of the poison. It was not a cure, but at most a temporary fix. Not that Jake in any way thought it possible the man would succumb to his wounds, even without knowing he had later become a god.

Valdemar then finally turned his attention towards the golden orb as he flew up to it, the barrier around it fading just as he did. The orb was nearly a hundred meters in diameter, but when the man laid his hand upon it, the size reduced to fit in his palm. He looked at it a bit as he put it into his storage and just flew down and landed on the ground again as he took out another bottle of alcohol as well as two mugs.

"One for the legend made today!" he said as he poured the liquid into one of the mugs. It was a golden ale-like drink of sorts, and the mugs were both old and wooden.

"And one for those of tomorrow!" Find the newest release on **novel~fire~net**

The second mug was filled as he placed it on a stone away from him and lifted the first mug to drink.

"To victory!" he yelled as he raised the mug in triumph, and for a fraction of a moment, Jake felt like Valdemar looked straight at him before the vision ended, and the skill came to an end.

The projections were in an uproar as suddenly, without any warning, the testee had disappeared. Not just gone invisible or been teleported, but literally disappeared from existence to every method of perception they had. Nearly every method.

"His Truesoul is still anchored here," a projection in charge of the dungeon monitoring tool said. It was only detectable due to direct system assistance from the dungeon, allowing not even the S-grades there to know what had happened.

Which meant whatever had made him disappear had to be either directly done by the system or perhaps a Bloodline or a Transcendent. Transcendent being the more probable, no matter how improbable it was for a D-grade to have one.

“Are you su-“

Before the question was asked, the human reappeared. Instantly something felt different as the Hydra also stopped up. The human turned his head towards the Hydra as he muttered: “Fangs... huh...”

None of the judges knew what he meant, but whatever had happened in the brief moment he was gone had somehow led to a change none of them was quite sure of.

The scalekin looked on as he genuinely wished for the human to win.

“He is in a state of enlightenment,” the beastkin said, as he frowned before grinning. “This might not be over quite yet.”

Jake returned to the “real world” as he processed what he had just experienced. His mind was still occupied as the Hydra stopped a few hundred meters away, looking on with newfound caution. Jake himself only now noticed he had gotten a notification quite a bit ago... about halfway through the vision.

**\*Skill Fusion Detected\*:**

***[Basic Twin-Fang Style (Uncommon)] + [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior)] --> [Improvised Weapon Mastery (Rare)]***

He was surprised at it, but it quickly became clear this was merely an intermediary step as only a bit later, another one had come.

**\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Improvised Weapon Mastery (Rare)] --> [Fangs of Man (Epic)]**

Ignoring the danger of the Hydra being able to close in and attack at any moment, Jake checked the new skill out as he finally managed to clear away that one eye-sore of a skill from his status sheet.

***[Fangs of Man (Epic)] – Humanity’s natural weapons have never been their teeth, claws, or anything else innate to them, but instead the tools they wield and their ability to adapt anything into an instrument of destruction. Allows the hunter to more effectively use anything deemed compatible as a melee weapon. Makes the hunter more familiar with any weapon wielded. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Strength, Agility no matter what melee weapon you wield.***

Jake still stood there as he held the broken wooden stick in his hand and Eternal Hunger in the other. The Bloodfeast Dagger had fallen to the ground a dozen or so meters away, but Jake wasn’t in a hurry to pick it back up.

Instead, he looked towards the Hydra as he held the stick. It was sharp, and Jake knew instinctually that his new skill worked with it. He grasped it tighter but felt it break as



Jake's grip was just too strong for it to handle. Jake frowned, and he knew it wasn't right. It didn't feel right yet.

Valdemar had flooded the fang with energy... no, with a sense of self. A sense of ownership as he truly made it into his weapon. Made it part of him. He also remembered what Villy had said of warriors seeing their weapons as extensions of their bodies through long-time nurturing. But Valdemar's was not that. To him, in that moment, anything could become the axe that was the arbiter of his will.

Jake picked up another stick as the Hydra looked on cautiously. It was still healing, so it wasn't losing out by doing so, and besides... it didn't seem smart enough to know what Jake was doing or trying to do. Not that Jake was entirely sure either.

The new stick was as weak as the one before, but Jake tried again. Not to recreate some concept, but simply to replicate that feeling. A few moments passed as a bit of energy invaded the stick, only for it to explode, getting a bit of movement out of the Hydra that now no longer wanted to just observe passively.

It charged as Jake wielded Eternal Hunger while still picking up another stick with a string of mana. He met the Hydra's charge as the battle began again. From the point of view of the Hydra, it had only been around a minute since it had smashed Jake away, but to him, it had been hours. Hours that felt longer than usual due to his feeling of inspiration and the effects of Path of the Heretic Chosen.

This meant Jake's mindset had time to change, and the momentum of the fight had reset. An unexpected bonus for sure, but a very welcome one. Jake did hamper himself a little as he dove into the battle, not necessarily to fight to win but to capitalize on his enlightenment through combat.

The two of them clashed as Jake was slightly faster than before, likely due to the increased agility, or maybe just because he was not frustrated like before and his mindset calmer. He dodged away from the mouth of the Hydra as Jake cut with Eternal Hunger and felt the blade cut through the scales a bit better than before. It was slight, but there.

Just after landing a blow, he was smashed back, but Jake stabilized and attacked again. He ran on pure inspiration as he smashed down the wooden stick, only for it to break on the scales as he was sent tumbling back from a snapping maw.

But he saw it. A small nick in the scale.

With a string of mana, he got another stick as he dove in. He slipped under an attack as he stabbed again in failure. This kept up a few more times as Jake got more and more injured, but he also felt like he got closer and closer.

To the Hydra, it was clearly winning, but to Jake, he felt like he got closer and closer to victory as he was repeatedly retaliated only to return with new sticks to try and stab with. He was in some ways lucky that he kept getting smashed through trees to get him new materials for his self-made stick spears.

*Not quite right*, Jake thought as he frowned. *Still not right... I need more... it needs to be like his...*

Valdemar had truly made it part of himself. Like an extension of his body. It was entirely different, and Jake wasn't delusional enough to believe he could copy the skill of an S-grade future Primordial, but he at least believed he was on the right track and could make something out of it. He was not satisfied with the current skill and would take it further.

Jake went all-out as he broke nearly a hundred sticks before suddenly something clicked as he lifted a stick and slammed it down. The Hydra just ignored it by now, but suddenly that changed. A notification sounded out in Jake's mind as he felt like the stick was truly a part of himself, and to the surprise of both Jake and the Hydra, it managed to break through the scales and embed itself a few centimeters into the flesh of the Hydra.

It didn't stop there as Eternal Hunger changed even more, and Jake cleaved down as he chopped down and left a deep wound, sending blood and scales flying into the air.

Before Jake could celebrate, he was smashed back by a tail swipe and tumbled to the ground before quickly getting up, unable to hold back his curiosity as he checked the system notification.

***\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Fangs of Man (Epic)] --> [Fangs of Man (Ancient)]***

***[Fangs of Man (Ancient)] – Inspired by an old legend, you walk a path of one yourself. Humanity's natural weapons have never been their teeth, claws, or anything else innate to them, but instead the tools they wield and their ability to adapt anything into an instrument of destruction. Allows the hunter to more effectively use anything deemed compatible as a melee weapon. Makes the hunter more familiar with any weapon wielded. As your comprehension of natural weapons grows, it allows you to truly make any weapon a part of yourself as you forcefully temporarily integrate it into your Soulshape as if an innate weapon, vastly increasing its durability if otherwise fragile. All effects related to weapon integration are more effective and easier to accomplish with Soulbound weapons. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Strength and Agility no matter what melee weapon you wield. Durability increase of weapons based on Willpower.***

Jake felt the inspiration rush in as he smirked. It wasn't even close to the level of what Valdemar did, but it was progress... right?

He also felt Eternal Hunger more than ever before as the faint roar of the Chimera in his Truesoul sounded out within his mind. It was utterly suppressed the next moment by his will, not that it was necessary as Eternal Hunger was clearly on his team in this fight.

It wanted to win and to drain the life of the Hydra. The life energy within the beast was far more valuable and of a higher level than anything Jake had ever fought before, and the weapon knew that. It was a qualitative difference that was recognized.

So Jake bent his knees as he prepared to charge forward with his new weapon... no, fang, in hand. The fang of a human. And as a fang, was it not natural that something else would follow? He had experienced and realized his inspiration in relation to Valdemar, but that was not all. One more thing now dominated his mind.

*This is my fang... so as the Viper could use his claws, I can use this.*

The weapon itself felt like a part of his body - like his own arm - if still a bit separate. One could liken it to a prosthetic, but one he could still vaguely feel, the same as he could "feel" his nails, teeth, and hair. It wasn't truly living or a part of him, but the system still considered it part of his Soulshape.

He knew the weapon was still below that as hair and nails and such would heal naturally while the weapon would not due to its temporary nature. Either way, it was still far stronger as he intimately felt the energy move through Eternal Hunger as he prepared his fang to strike and move his next goal.

It was time to push the second skill to a higher rarity: Fang of the Malefic Viper.

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## Chapter 413: The Human Has Fangs

Jake finally had a proper melee skill, one already surpassing his archery skill by quite a margin rarity-wise. Jake knew this wasn't due to him suddenly being a more skilled fighter but due to his comprehension of whatever Valdemar had done. It was a concept he could no doubt apply elsewhere too and of a high concept that raised the rarity.

One of those places it could be applied was with Fangs of the Malefic Viper.

He had already gained experience from what the Malefic Viper had done in the vision. Jake had felt the effects of Fangs of the Malefic Viper in the claws of the Viper, so why couldn't Jake do it with his weapon if that was his "fang," so to say?

And as before, Jake would use the Hydra as his grindstone as they brawled. The simple nature of his opponent made it optimal for this, but it was a bit problematic that he was still getting his ass handed to him even after he gained Fangs of Man. The skill didn't magically make Jake several times better in melee, even if it did surely improve his abilities.

The Hydra kept attacking as the two snapping maws pushed Jake back, as he now at least managed to block more than before. Moreover, he did begin to see some benefits he had not expected.

Eternal Hunger was now more linked to him than ever, which meant its use was more instinctive and innate. There was a direct connection between them that allowed Jake to pour energy not just around the blade like he usually did with skills such as Descending Dark Arcane Fang, but also directly into it. At least somewhat.

This connection turned out to only be one way, if still stronger now. The lifesteal effect of Eternal Hunger was more powerful than ever as Jake managed to land a few good blows, even if he took more himself. The regeneration offered from the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger before he upgraded it had always been low if not downright negligible. Eternal Hunger was a lot better, but it was still not a massive boon and primarily useful when he was killing many weaker foes.

But now? Now Jake saw his wounds visibly heal on his arm that held Eternal Hunger as the energy went directly through Jake's arm, shoulder, and into his Truesoul around his heart with every strike. From there on, any remnant vital energy pulsed through his body to heal him with a far weaker effect, which did lead to the odd situation of his arm appearing near-undamaged even if the rest of his body was a bit of a mess.

As for his wooden sticks? Yeah, no matter how great a skill Jake had, he couldn't overcome the limits of material Strength. He could integrate the sticks, but ultimately a wooden stick was a wooden stick. Valdemar had used the Viper's fang, and even if said fang was far weaker due to it being dislodged from the Viper's Soulshape, it was still a far better raw material than some fragile marsh wood.

Due to that, Jake pulled back as he retrieved the Bloodfeast Dagger. It was far worse than Eternal Hunger, but it was still a good weapon, and he could even use the special enchantment on it to cut himself and pour blood on his foes.

The blood in his veins was a deadly weapon after all, and the venom in his own canines was an even more improved version of that blood, so if he could bi-

*Ah...*

Jake got an idea. He retreated further than before and flew up into the air where the Hydra didn't even try to follow. Up there, Jake closed his eyes as he dismissed the Bloodfeast Dagger and only held onto Eternal Hunger as he tightly gripped it.

With a bit of foresight, he reduced Arcane Awakening to 30% to not burn his own life away while he experienced enlightenment.

He focused on his own body and his Soulshape as he felt the wings beating on his back and the energy moving through it. He felt the scales that covered his body, but moreover, he felt how they were connected to him. The wings had veins running through them. His own veins, which was why they could bleed even if they weren't actually a part of his true Soulshape.

The scales were similar but also very different. The scales were not "living" like his wings but closer to teeth and hair. A part of the Soulshape, but the nature of the connection was different. There clearly was one, though, as he felt like microscopic metaphysical veins of his Soulshape moved into each individual scale. This allowed him to absorb energy from them after the legendary upgrade and reminded him a bit of the connection between himself and Eternal Hunger.

Years of training his Shroud of the Primordial had allowed Jake to truly feel his Soulshape. Feeling had led to comprehension as comprehension and feeling came together to form control. Control had given Jake many minor benefits, such as his wings being slightly better, Arcane Awakening becoming a bit more efficient, and overall he was just better at not wasting his energy.

Throughout the body of a D-grade's Soulshape, millions of small metaphysical veins moved that allowed energy – primarily stamina – to travel. Some were larger than others and could carry more energy, such as those that followed his actual physical veins, but others were so small they barely did anything. In fact, most were barren as running energy through them was only done when using certain skills or perhaps overloading your own body. New ones could also appear and disappear at will.

These energy veins entered each scale, entered his wings, but did not enter the weapon he held. The sword was just attached to his hand like a truly dead object... at least it would be so under normal circumstances. Because a black, almost tangible vein did go from Eternal Hunger and into Jake's Truesoul.

It was the connection formed to transfer health and the funnel of health energy. It had been further amplified by Fang of Man as many of Jake's veins now attached themselves to the funnel. But this funnel was the only thing. It was a one-lane highway only feeding Jake and the Chimera in his Truesoul.

Jake then turned his perception to his teeth. His canines. He focused and saw a peculiar collection of veins going into each, and when he used Fangs, they all activated as the venom began just magically appearing on his teeth.

This is where he was stumped... for this was not merely due to the veins, but some higher concept. Some principal magic beyond Jake's comprehension that there was no

chance for him as a mere D-grade to learn. He couldn't understand it... but he could feel it.

And sometimes, in the equation of getting control through understanding and feeling, one could lean enough into one part to still succeed. Jake began slowly forming a path as he used the Soulbound connection as a basis.

Eternal Hunger gladly helped as Jake almost felt guided and assisted. He remembered the feeling the Viper's fangs gave during Path of the Heretic Chosen, and he focused on the venom he was still making inside his own mouth.

The connection was already there, connecting himself and Eternal Hunger. He just needed to expand the metaphysical highway of veins with a few more lanes to allow the toxic payload to get through. It was an arduous process as he forged the web with the Soulbound connection at the center.

But soon enough, he began feeling changes as something else vital kicked in: system assistance. Fangs of Man, his experience in the vision, and Jake's control over his own Soulshape was enough to pass the threshold, it appeared.

As it kicked in and recognized his effort, venom began to seep out of his nails as a connection was formed to them too when the web of veins reached his hands, truly giving Jake claws.

This continued spreading as the system truly rewarded his own mentality and allowed his interpretation through. It spread through the blade as invisible veins invaded it to the delight of Eternal Hunger as the blade was more tied to him than ever before. He felt the power in it as a notification came, and he felt like he himself grew stronger.

Jake raised Eternal Hunger as venom began slowly seeping out of the edge as he regarded his weapon.

No... his fang.

***[Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] - When born, the Viper had limited weapons to fight with, yet it prevailed only with its fangs. Its bites the deliverer of death. As a human, you have taken inspiration and learned to apply the same concept. Allows the Alchemist to coat his teeth in deadly venom, sharing all the same effects as Blood of the Malefic Viper in an empowered state. Additionally, all poisons you have crafted or created are significantly more effective when injected directly into the body of your foes. Passively provides 1 Strength per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May you bring death in a single strike.***

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***[Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] - When born, the Viper had limited weapons to fight with, yet it prevailed only with its fangs. Its bites the deliverer of death. As a human, you have integrated these concepts and made them your own. Allows the Alchemist to coat his teeth in deadly venom, sharing all the same effects as Blood of the Malefic Viper in an empowered state. Allows any part of your Soulshape viewed as a weapon to function as fangs, making it possible to excrete venom through them, and passively empowers any toxin upon your fangs. Additionally, all poisons you have crafted or created are significantly more effective when injected directly into the body of your foes. Passively provides 3 Strength per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your fangs be the harbingers of death.***

Out of all the skills Jake had upgraded, this was perhaps the one that differentiated the most from one of the Viper's pure skills. He had truly deviated... at least, that was one way to see it.

Another was that Jake's was no different from the Viper's. What differed was merely their definition of what was part of one's body and Soulshape and what defined a fang.

As always, Jake's evolution was further rewarded. Even if he had noticed skill upgrades in his class not doing jack shit, the upgrades in his profession always came through, as with upgrades came levels.

***\*‘DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 150 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\****

***\*‘DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 151 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\****

***\*‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 152 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\****

Jake had already felt the levels before, but he still basked in the confirmation as he felt ready. His blade hummed with power and hunger as Jake regarded his opponent down below. By now, the Hydra had mostly managed to heal itself as it now only regarded him with one head.

It likely didn't believe Jake a threat. He had already shown himself inferior once, so it probably thought a bit of floating in the air wouldn't change that. Quite the opposite, as it would allow the Hydra to fully heal and be able to dunk on him afterward.

Jake was keen on proving it wrong.

He felt the power in the blade as his own venom pulsed through. At the current stage, Jake was certain the best all-around poison he had available was the one on his weapon and teeth. That was something that would no doubt change as Jake improved



his skills in alchemy, but for now, the best he could do was what was on his weapon already.

His Strength had also improved from the upgrade of Fang as Jake now felt more confident. Everything came together as the multiple upgrades had transformed Jake from a purely defensive fighter to one with... well, fangs.

In something out of character, Jake even went ahead and tossed the seventy Free Points he had stored up into Strength to give him more of an edge as he needed the pure power to penetrate the scales. Usually, Jake didn't need much Strength as he just needed to do enough to inflict his poison, but the Hydra had proved that difficult as Jake had to put a lot of weight behind every blow to draw blood.

He hoped he could now more easily puncture the scales. Something he would put to the test immediately.

Jake activated Arcane Awakening at full power once more as he shot down like a meteor. The Hydra reacted as it raised both heads, not letting its guard down despite the time passing and its own state improving. Jake flew straight for one of its maws as he stopped up and stepped down as he teleported down to the ground, appearing behind the Hydra.

With a thrash, it turned around and swept its heads towards him, but Jake dodged them as he landed a cut with Eternal Hunger. The blade more easily cut the meat of the Hydra as a few scales were sent flying and Jake felt the poison invade the body of his foe.

He was retaliated against a moment later, but Jake now had confidence and attempted to grasp the momentum of battle in a vice-grip, just like Valdemar had done. To never let up and let his foe rest but indomitably attack as if victory was a foregone conclusion.

That was the mindset Jake tried to replicate as he kept coming. The Bloodfeast Dagger was drawn again as the connection was formed. With the skill upgraded and system assistance in full effect, Fang of the Malefic Viper also worked on other weapons than those Soulbound instantly as he now had two highly toxic fangs, just like any other proper predator.

Jake kept diving in as he managed to land far more blows than before, and the Hydra noticed as it became more defensive, not only relying on its incredibly tough scales to resist his weapons. Jake would prefer to stab with his weapons to get the best effect, but sadly the fight didn't allow it as a stabbing attack would require far too much commitment.

He did try to use Descending Dark Arcane Fang too and found the skill better than before, but sadly he once more simply didn't have leeway to use it. He even tried to use

Gaze to give him an opening, but even while frozen, the Hydra could release its own paralyzing roar somehow.

But, even so, Jake still had confidence. He felt that if the fight was long enough, he would have a chance, and maybe he could even pull a victory out of his a-

Then the entire marsh and Hydra disappeared as Jake, halfway through an attack, stood back in the same chamber he had originally entered from. He stood frozen for a moment as the scalekin projection appeared.

“Time’s up, congratulations on-“

“What the actual fuck?” Jake yelled as he looked at the projection. “Send me back!”

“I am afraid that isn’t possible, and the rewards have already bee-“

“I don’t care about any rewards; just send me back, come on!” Jake insisted as he looked at the projection with pleading eyes as the realization sank in. He kind of knew already... Newest update provided by **novel•fire•met**

“The dungeon does not facilitate that. The trial was an hour-long one, and that is something nobody can change after the dungeon rules have been set in stone and the scenario fully implemented,” the projection explained, patient to Jake’s attitude.

Jake looked at the scalekin as he deflated. He deactivated Arcane Awakening as he plopped down on the ground. “I fucking had it, man...”

“Perhaps... perhaps not,” the scalekin said, shaking his head. “No matter what, your performance was exemplary. So don’t be too downtrodden. To fight the Lord Protector straight on is no easy feat and will be reflected in your rewards.”

“Can my reward be a rematch?” Jake asked, half-jokingly but also with a bit of hope.

The scalekin took a moment to answer as he frowned. He clearly was distracted for a second or so before he spoke. “But I have been allowed to reveal to you a snippet of information. The highest level D-grade combat dungeon in the Order contains the possibility of battling the Lord Protector just before he evolved to C-grade.”

Jake heard this as he calmed down, and a goal appeared in his mind. *I am fucking coming for you, Snappy.*

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## Chapter 414: Academy Entry Token

Rewards were barely in Jake's mind as he mentally went over the fight and looked forward to the rematch. Snappy had been damn strong back then if a very simplistic creature. It was also a bad matchup for Jake, but in some ways, that just made him want to fight even more. He did find it a bit frustrating, sure, but in the good way.

You know, frustrating in the same way a hard boss in a game could be. You would curse and swear while battling the boss, sure, but the moment you won, all that frustration would turn to triumph and make it all seem worth it.

This one was on the extreme end of that as it was the kind to make you want to punch through a wall and yell expletives and call bullshit to the overpowered mechanics of the boss. In the Hydra's case, its absolutely broken swallowing ability and the scales that offered utterly insane resistance to physical attacks were those bullshit mechanics.

"Alright," Jake said as he returned his attention to the projection in front of him. "What happens now?"

"You passed the test, and thus it ends here, and you will be allowed entrance into the Order of the Malefic Viper. Your final grade has been decided at four stars, level five, with five stars level ten the maximum. This puts you well ahead of the curve, but you still have a lot to work on, especially in the alchemy portion, where your overall performance was only considered slightly above average. Even then, it was only due to you excelling in some tests and utterly flunking others. Your foundation in alchemy is weak, and you have much to work on, but your talent in the fundamental aspects and your mindset are well-attuned to the profession, so keep it up.

"In the combat portion, you heightened your rating. If this rating was purely based on that, you would have gained a top mark, but as it is, it still allowed you to push it further than most of us judges expected. None of us truly have any comments on combat, as I believe it best you continue forging your own path there. Once more, just keep it up, and I believe your path will take you far. Newest update provided by **novel•fire•net**

"Finally, to your rewards. The primary one coming in the form of the Academy Entry Token."

With those words, a small black hexagonal token was summoned in front of the projection with the motif of the Order inscribed upon it, glowing a faint dark green color. Jake naturally identified it right away.

***[4-star Academy Entry Token of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – A four-star token of the Order of the Malefic Viper entrance test, ranked at level five. This token is proof you have passed the academy entrance test with exemplary performance.***

***Serves as both an identification token and can be exchanged within the Order for rewards. Contains information related to the test undergone and notes from the judges.***

Before he could ask anything, the projection spoke again. “The information embedded in the token has been modified directly by the Malefic One with certain elements and descriptions changed based on the Patron’s will.”

“Oh, alright,” Jake said as he took the token. He infused some energy into it and was surprised at the knowledge within. There were a lot of notes from over a hundred judges, nearly all of it related to alchemy, and a lot of them gave small tips or just pointed him in certain directions.

“The second reward is a bit less exciting but surely still useful. It is a refined stinger of a manticore just like the one you killed. An excellent alchemical ingredient that can give birth to some interesting poisons and even be used in a weapon with your transmutation.”

The large stinger appeared, about the size of Jake himself. It looked massive and powerful, and he felt something had been done to it to make it stronger if a bit smaller than the real thing. The Beastcore had definitely been infused into it along with other valuable ingredients to make it stronger, and within, he felt several liters of the venom as well as what looked like a gland still able to slowly produce more.

***[Refined Manticore Stringer (Epic)] – the refined stinger of a high-tier D-grade Manticore. The venom within is now more powerful than ever, even compared to when it was alive. This toxin is of the earth affinity and will petrify anything it comes into contact with. Slowly produces more venom when infused with appropriate energy. Has many alchemical uses.***

“Looks good,” Jake said as he scooped it up. He did consider for a moment putting it into Palate, but he already had the Root of Eternal Resentment in there. Jake had put it back as, quite frankly, the treasure was just too good not to learn from. It was a unique item with – as expected – unique properties to store energy, especially curse energy, making it very interesting to him.

“With this, the test ends, and you will be admitted into the academy,” the scalekin projection said with a smile as a gate appeared right behind Jake.

Jake nodded. “Thanks for all the help. This entire thing has been very enlightening and helpful, and also quite fun. Definitely one of the better exams of my life..”

“The pleasure is all ours,” the scalekin said as he appeared to hesitate. “Before you go, can I ask one thing to settle debates? This knowledge will naturally never leave this place.”

“Shoot,” Jake answered.

“Are you the Chosen of the Malefic Viper or deeply related to him in some other way?”

“I do have the True Blessing, yep,” Jake confirmed as he saw the projection's eyes open wide. He bowed slightly, but Jake quickly stopped him. “Ah, none of that; I am not doing that Chosen stuff. Besides, I am equal heretic, equal Chosen, so it's all fine.”

“Heretic?” the projection asked, confused.

“Yep. Turns out being friends with your Patron god is considered heretical,” Jake shrugged.

“Friends?” the projection asked as Jake felt not only his confusion but even the confusion of the other judges gazing upon him.

“Yep,” Jake said, not bothering with the confusion. “Hey, it is what it is. Thanks for the help again, everyone!”

With that, Jake stepped through the gate before allowing the projections to react more to his antics. He was quite sure he just earned a few more heretic points, though.

“I guess you do have a future in alchemy, but your stubborn insistence on using suboptimal methods and generally weak and flimsy mindset will become a hindrance. Combat-wise, you scrape by as average, but your mindset is faulty even there. You need some proper life and death experience, that is certain. You still managed to reach a two-star level two rating, and you are young, so don't quit quite yet. But do address your fundamental flaws,” the projection of the elven alchemist said.

Reika looked down at the floor as she took a verbal beating from the projection yet again. This entire test had been an exercise in showing her exactly how incompetent she was. The worst part was she couldn't even argue without coming off as even more stupid and ignorant.

These projections had lived longer than the modern idea of science had even existed and done alchemy for at least thousands of years. The methods Reika believed to be new and innovative based on pre-system scientific methodology were something they were all aware of and, to Reika's surprise, looked down upon as it contained many flaws she had never imagined.

It was too rigid, too much focus on objective observations and establishing of processes and replicable results. It was too scientific and didn't consider the element of the metaphysical and the magical. How willpower and belief could somehow affect the outcome or how no experiment was ever truly replicable. Circumstances always changed, and there did not exist two one hundred percent identical herbs in the entire

multiverse, making an “objective” theory only objective in the case of that one crafting session.

Reika had never considered any of this. Not truly. In some ways, she had looked down on Jake, who said he mostly went by feel when doing alchemy, but now she realized she had totally abandoned doing so. The test where one had to react fast enough to changes she had utterly failed. Reika just didn't know how to face anything emergent she hadn't already predicted and made countermeasures for, which in the name of the judges made her third-rate at best and a sad imitation of a true alchemist.

Not that there weren't areas where her mindset on alchemy was good. She would just never become great if she held onto such a limiting approach. Reika was normally proud and generally not the most receptive, but...

“Thank you for your guidance,” she said as she bowed to the projection.

In this case, she would eat it up and integrate it to make herself better. She knew she had done badly and had a long way to go. Her stubbornness and pride remained. Now it would just be channeled to truly take in everything this academy had to teach.

She just had one worry: how crushed every other alchemist she had brought from the clan had to feel right now as if she had gotten slammed, then they must have gotten utterly destroyed.

Jake appeared outside the dungeon as he was once more surrounded by people. Quite a few quickly looked his way before returning to their own business. It only took a dozen or so seconds before the same succubus as before appeared from a newly opened gate.

“I hope the test proceeded as expected? Please follow me right through here as we wait for the others to arrive,” she said as she motioned for him to go come over.

“I guess it went fine. How many have finished by now?” Jake asked as he walked over.

“Only about one out of five is done,” she answered.

“I see,” Jake said. “Is being fast good or bad?”

“Depends on the reason. Most of the extra time comes from the breaks between tests, especially the combat test. People who did well in the early levels of combat tend to be done faster, but the same is also true for those who lose early and don't have to do many fights,” she explained as they went through the gateway and entered the same cozy waiting room from before.

There Jake saw a few had indeed returned. He did spot two alchemists from Earth who both looked rather depressed as they sat in a corner on the lowest level. Reika was not

back yet, but he did spot a few of the stronger ones. Draskil, the Malefic Dragonkin, was not back as Jake walked to the highest area right away.

The succubus followed him all the way as she asked: "I will need to see the token you received to process the details of your admittance to the academy."

"Right," Jake agreed as he took out the token. She froze for a moment when she saw the token as she looked at him, a bit surprised. She didn't say anything but quickly took the token and held it to the token she herself always carried around. Some kind of energy appeared to be transferred as the succubus looked even more puzzled.

Puzzlement that seemed to vanish in an instant as she smiled and handed it back to him. "Here is your token, and that must have been an awe-inspiring performance leading to excellent results. I don't believe I ever introduced myself; I am Irinixis, but just call me Irin. I am the one in charge of your batch of academy members, so feel free to ask me anything or call on me for any assistance."

She said this as Jake took the token, and he did take notice of how she seemed to make sure to touch his hand as she did so. Her entire demeanor had changed. Jake sucked at things like this normally, but even he wouldn't miss such obvious flirting.

"I will keep it in mind, Irin," Jake said as he smirked a bit beneath his mask. Hey, he was a guy, and he would lie to himself if he didn't admit he found a god damn succubus attractive. For Villy's sake, being attractive was a primary trait of their race.

Irin smiled at his answer as she bowed slightly, exposing her already exposed cleavage more. "I shall go handle matters then. Please wait here till the others arrive and see you around!"

With that, she walked off as Jake looked after her. He shook his head as he sat down on one of the chairs to wait. He had no idea how long it would take, so for now, he just did the most natural thing and went over his gains.

After the dungeon, all of his wounds had healed, so he didn't even have to regenerate. He was also reminded of it being an actual dungeon when he noticed his Dungeoneer title had upgraded, giving three more stats. It was super minor but nice.

Overall, his status had improved quite a lot as he checked it out in its entirety.

## **Status**

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 152]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 153]



Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 151]

Health Points (HP): 40560/40560

Mana Points (MP): 58225/58225

Stamina: 30870/30870

### **Stats**

Strength: 2741

Agility: 5549

Endurance: 3087

Vitality: 4056

Toughness: 2910

Wisdom: 4658

Intelligence: 3749

Perception: 9782

Willpower: 3802

Free points: 0

**Titles:** [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VII], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Legendary Prodigy],[Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator]

**Class Skills:** [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Moment of (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)]

**Profession Skills:** [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [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)]

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

**Race Skills:** [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

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

Jake went over the list that he felt just kept growing, even if he had managed to cut out a class skill by merging two into one. Stats-wise, his Strength got a good bump as the retroactive benefits of Fang upgrading kicked in as well as him investing some Free Points. Other stats like Agility and, of course, Perception had also increased a lot.

All in all, Jake was happy with his progress. It was good he had gotten some class experience in by making Eternal Hunger and killing some termites and all that because he had a feeling he would have a lot of alchemy in the near future.

And a few fights, hopefully. If he knew Villy as well as he thought he did, then there was no way the academy experience would be a wholly peaceful one.

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## Chapter 415: A Different Time

Jake sat in meditation a bit as he went over his gains and familiarized himself a bit more with Fangs of Man and his improved Fang of the Malefic Viper. Having the time, he also reached out to the Viper, who promptly answered.

*"So, thoughts on the test dungeon? It is pretty old and outdated, but it still gets the job done, doesn't it?"* the Viper's voice echoed in his head.

*“Rather uninspired interior design, I must say. Very old-timey and old temple-like. Reminded me a bit of an abandoned crypt,”* Jake answered jokingly.

*“I would have the designer executed if she hadn’t died well over a trillion years ago,”* Villy answered.

*“Heh. Anyway, I think it was fine, but I don’t really have any frame of reference, now do I?”*

*“True. But you did at least get to fight a strong opponent,”* Villy said with an obviously teasing tone. *“Hydras aren’t easy foes, and this particular one sure had you countered.”*

*“I would have won without the timer,”* Jake asserted.

*“Maybe, maybe not. It did certainly become a possibility after your powerup and upgrade of Fangs. You used the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill, right? Or have you gained some new skill or ability since last that makes you ignore cause and effect to travel through space and time?”* the Viper asked.

*“Nah, just the old and boring Path,”* Jake answered, but he felt reluctant to get into details. The vision had not exactly been a flattering one for the Viper.

*“Oh? Not spilling the beans what it is about?”* the Viper asked. *“Come on, you already saw my bad phase at B-grade back then. This can’t be worse.”*

Jake decided to not hide anything if the Viper wanted to pry as he just said four words. *“Valdemar. Fang of man.”*

A few seconds of silence followed. It was enough for Jake to consider if saying it was a mistake, but luckily the Viper finally spoke:

*“Was there a golden sphere involved or present?”*

*“Yep.”*

*“Ah... right.”*

*“Yep...”*

The two of them sat in silence for a while before Jake finally broke it. *“Pretty specieist back then, not gonna lie.”*

*“I guess you need some context?”* the Viper asked. *“It was a different time, you know.”*

*“Pretty sure I have heard that excuse before when people did some messed up shit when younger... and it wasn’t like you were young,”* Jake said half-jokingly.

*“Alright, alright. Listen, it really was a different time. There was far more antagonism back then and a lack of mutual respect. The enlightened races treated all monster races like trash and viewed them as lesser, while the powerful monsters began looking down on humans and elves and the like. It was a kill-or-be-killed kind of scenario whenever you met.*

*“Believe it or not, that day was the first time I faced a human lower level than myself after reaching sapience that beat me. I had lost to humans before but always when they came in groups or were vastly higher level. I still held respect for humans, however, not as fighters but as creators. They were some of the best craftsmen around, with me having learned much from them in the realm of alchemy. Valdemar was an... outlier,” Villy said with resignation.*

*“He did seem rather unique,” Jake agreed.*

*“You don’t know the half of it. Valdemar was and still is an absolute monster. That fight back then was a humiliating loss that made me reconsider my stance on the enlightened races as a whole and began working with them more, not as servants but equals. You also need to understand that humans as a whole are far more reliant on Records and history than a beast like me. You nearly always need legacies and such to truly excel. Your racial skills even revolve around passing these legacies down. This, at least, was what I thought until Valdemar proved me wrong. The two of us both have in common that we lived during the integration of the first universe. He had no legacies but forged his path entirely on his own.*

*“Think about it. Humans have a way more diverse path than beasts and way more space to adapt. Legacies help expand this. Meanwhile, a beast is mostly set after evolving, with little to no skill choices during entire grades. I remember very rarely getting five options, and that was only due to me walking a diverse path, to begin with. Someone like Snappy never had a single choice in D-grade and only a handful in his entire journey to godhood. Beasts instead choose their path solely by their actions and their evolutions. This is to say, beasts are defined by their race which is often not related to anything but their own path, while humans rely far more on their classes and professions, which are heavily defined by legacies and the experience of their ancestors and what they learn from each other. One can frame it as humans being far more reliant on knowledge and experience while beasts just need to kill, grow and improve on their own.*

*“To me, back then, the natural result of this was humans having a far wider breadth of power but could never reach the top as an individual, only a collective. They had forced upon them professions that result in inherent non-combat potential, something that in a beast would nearly always come with a trade-off in fighting power. If the power scale went from one to a hundred, a human could never surpass ninety, while beasts and monsters could.*

*“Naturally, I know now the multiverse doesn’t work like that. The multiverse is far too open to opportunities, and a set scale doesn’t matter. Too many ways to grow more powerful exist. Valdemar forged a path I could not comprehend and grasped power beyond anyone else I had ever faced at the time. He was not some paragon of his race or someone more knowledgeable than anyone else. He was just an individual. He opened my eyes to never looking down at someone for their race alone, especially not enlightened species. As time passed, it has only been confirmed again, and again the true power you can achieve isn’t defined by your race but by who you are as a person, your talent, and so many other factors. These are what is truly important.”*

The Viper made the long speech as Jake listened intently. He liked the explanation even if there was not much new. In fact...

*“You are actually embarrassed, aren’t you?”*

To overexplain why you did something was the hallmark of someone embarrassed and Villy seemed to really want to justify and explain why he acted as he did back then. It was very relatable.

*“Do you have to rub it in? I am beginning to really dislike that skill of yours that just shows you uncurated shit. If someone from the Holy Church got such a skill, they would be executed promptly for being able to circumvent all the propaganda and whatnot,”* Villy said, but with a tone of jest.

*“Way of changing the subject,”* Jake joked back. *“But hey, good to know even evil snake gods can learn to grow as a person. And speaking of growing... who is stronger now? You or Valdemar?”*

It was an obvious question Jake couldn’t help but ask.

*“I guess I should have seen that one coming... but I don’t know. Do I think I can beat Valdemar? No, not really, but I don’t think he can beat me either. The thing is, Valdemar only truly fights someone when he has a cause. A justification that makes him want to fight and create a legend from it. Ah, but if you speak of a duel... well, let’s just say I tend to avoid them as fighting him is a pain. In a fight to the death, the most likely is either one party retreating or mutual destruction. This assumes third parties don’t involve themselves and we fight on neutral ground too... all of this is to say there are too many factors,”* the Viper answered.

*“I see,”* Jake said, not really wanting to pry more.

*“Anyway, it sounds like you had quite the journey, and I will say that taking inspiration from Valdemar would be smart. You and he do have some similarities in mindset but are just as different, but if it is just about melee fighting and his application of will, go right ahead. Just don’t try to mimic him too much... he has just as many places where he has absolutely no talents,”* Villy said, obviously taking a jab.

*“Such as?”*

*“His talent when it comes to manipulating mana is so bad he ended up completely giving up on it and eventually transformed it all into stamina and health somehow through sheer rejection of the resource. Also, his profession was very much neglected, which was part of the reason why he was so strong despite his low race level. Valdemar was already level 999 in his class back then and was working on his profession,” the Viper said.*

*“Let me guess, his profession is to be a brewer of some kind?”* Jake asked.

*“Yeah, that was the only thing he figured out how to really do as his father apparently owned a brewery before the system. Well, Valdemar said his father owned a brewery but later said he just made moonshine and sold it under the table,”* the Viper said jokingly.

*“It sounds like you two made friends later on?”* Jake asked half-rhetorically. The Viper seemed to know a lot of personal stuff about the guy after all and even talked about duels.

*“Yeah. That first encounter was not our last, and we butted heads a dozen or so more times before godhood. I did win some and lose some, but more often, it never got that extreme as one party had an advantage making the other back off. After godhood, it ended up being an utter stalemate. It was and still is for all the Primordials, so eventually, we ended up just co-existing and, in some ways, got close. It is hard to personally know someone for countless years and not begin to understand them and get to know them. Of course, some get along better than others, and there is plenty of healthy rivalry going on, but we can all get along in the same room as a semi-dysfunctional family,”* the Viper explained.

*“Sounds fun. Though you and Eversmile didn’t strike me as on the friendliest of terms and didn’t you kind of screw over Stormild with the whole Sylphie contract thing?”* Jake asked pointedly.

*“As I said, healthy rivalry and plenty of disfunction. Have no doubt that if both needed help with a task, they would also come to me and ask, and that both of those have also taken advantage of me in the past.”*

*“Fine. I’ll let you off with a warning not to look down on humans this time around, aight?”* Jake thought, unable to hold back a smirk.

*“I am astounded at your benevolence,”* the Viper answered.

*“Now, any comments on the test yourself and how I did?”* IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT *novel✕fire✕net*



*“Take the advice of the teachers there and follow what is in the token. The only thing I will add is to not take it as gospel but merely a guiding hand. Just focus on the sentiment of their teachings rather than any actionable advice,”* Villy answered.

*“Noted,”* Jake thought. *“If there is nothing else, I will get some meditation done and actually reflect on stuff. You know, like the judges in the trial advised.”*

*“Seeing you make smart choices brings a tear to my eyes,”* Villy teased.

*“Better be careful, or I shall have you taste the fang of-“*

Without any warning, Villy cut off the line of communication as Jake smirked to himself. There was something profoundly enjoyable about taking jabs at a god far more powerful than himself. Also, he knew Villy could take it and, in this case, kind of deserved it as he had been an arrogant dickhead back in the day.

Well, more of an arrogant dickhead than current Villy. Not that Jake should throw stones while living in a glasshouse. He wasn't exactly the most humble either.

Anyway, Jake entered meditation as time slowly passed, and through his sphere, he felt the waiting room fill up over the next day or so. During his meditation, Jake reflected primarily on the vision from Path of the Heretic-Chosen as he knew he had more to internalize. He also considered the fight with Snappy and how he could have done better, and what to do if he met a similar opponent in the future.

Reika had also arrived by now and looked rather glum but also surprisingly determined. The same could not be said about the alchemists following her, and Jake considered going down checking on them but ultimately decided against it. They had Reika, and Jake was not going to the Order to play babysitter. If they had been crushed in spirit from the trial, now was the time to get their shit together and actually improve. He did notice one alchemist missing, though.

Draskil came into the room on the fourth day since the first person entered the dungeon, looking rather glum himself too. He had taken far longer than Jake and most others, making Jake wonder why that was. More surprising was that it ended up taking the full week as the succubus had warned them about before the final person arrived. The level 168, now 169, harpy was the last to be done.

On that note, Draskil had not leveled up, while Jake had not chosen to appear higher either.

The succubus had returned together with the harpy. Irinixis, as she was called, regarded them all as Jake felt her gaze linger on himself but also Draskil as she smiled.

“I want to congratulate you all on finishing the test. Only ten people died during the dungeon too, which is pretty good. As for the performances, the average rating was



rather low at only two-stars level one, with the highest at four stars level ten, on the cusp of attaining five stars. The lowest was at one-star level one, attained by not one but three people. That, I must admit, is surprisingly pathetic,” the succubus said curtly.

Jake mainly bit onto how the highest rating was four-stars level ten. That was quite a bit better than his own at four-stars level five. From the looks of it, Draskil wasn't the one to get this grade either, as they both exchanged glances when it was announced.

A few more minutes passed as the succubus talked some stuff about the test before continuing.

“Now, let us move on. Remember, no matter how well you did in the test, this is only the beginning and in no way something that determines your path. This is merely the beginning of your journeys as alchemists. You all come from a newly integrated universe, which has granted certain advantages, but also demerits, such as your lack of proper teachers and equal sparring partners. So don't fret no matter what your performance was, as now is the time to prove how talented you truly are.

“Soon, you will be taken to your residences, which will be based on your performance in the test. One and two-star performances will be in the communal dorms, while three and four-stars will get their own personal residences and benefits depending on their evaluations. Naturally, those in the dorms can also get their own residence if they perform well, with more information to follow on how to upgrade. When you get to your residences, an information package will be present. I am assigned as the attendant in charge of this batch, and once you have exchanged your tokens, the new ones will include a way to contact me. Now, please follow me to the token exchange, and let's get you all settled.”

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## **Chapter 416: An Uncertain Future**

Meira laid on the ground within the tiny cell as she took pained breaths. Every time she breathed in, the toxic gas would invade her lungs and body, burning her throat and making her wish she could just stop. However, the wardens outside would come for her in moments if the toxic fumes didn't decrease at a fast enough rate for their liking.

Ever since the day the Brimstone Hegemon had been slain, and she had been enslaved by the Order of the Malefic Viper, she had been forced to either endure torture, been forced to do certain tasks, or confined and taught lessons they believed she would

need. She had just wanted to give up so many times, but she was just too cowardly to stop trying to survive.

She hadn't heard anything about her father or the rest of her clan in months either, which only added to the torture. Her father had been captured together with her, and the Order no doubt controlled the clan she had once come from. Likely it was just much of the same for those back home, their masters having simply changed.

Soon enough, she felt like the toxins in the room had decreased enough, and just as she felt like she could relax, the cell door opened. Meira was still on the ground, her health down to less than a third as she barely managed to open her eyes.

"Is this the one?" a voice asked. One unfamiliar to Meira. They spoke the common tongue used within the Order, a language she had learned quite quickly during her capture. It was one of the things she had been forced to learn, which had actually served as a bit of a consolation. After all, would they bother teaching someone they would just kill their language?

"That is the elf. Evolved a month ago and is one of the better ones," the warden in charge of her answered. "Got high marks on nearly everything, and her class and profession are both suitable to the role. Plus, she is an elf, and they tend to be popular with humans, don't they?"

"Hm," the newcomer said as Meira felt a healing spell fall upon her. Her health was restored, and the poison nullified. "Get up."

She did as asked as she stood in her ragged robe. The newcomer that was clearly above the rank of the warden looked her up and down and held out a crystal. "Imprint the basics of your Status on this."

Meira once more complied as her status was transferred. Just basics of her race, class, and profession as well as the general level of her stats.

She had evolved to D-grade a month or so ago, having gained the Perfect Evolution. This would normally be great, but she hadn't truly been able to choose what she wanted. She had been forced into selecting a class and profession based on what the Order wanted. It was also clear that one of the reasons they had chosen to take her was because she was close enough to D-grade to mold her to their liking.

The only thing that consoled her was that at least none of her evolutions had the word slave in it... not that she wasn't offered options that did.

"Seems adequate," the newcomer bigshot said. Meira finally raised her view as she saw the robes the person wore. It was one of the people from "Humanoid Resources," a part of the Order that not only handled internal matters of members but also the slaves and servants.

The woman in front of her was also an elf, but a dark-skinned Dark Elf rather than a “pure” elf like Meria herself. These elves were far more talented in dark magic of all sorts and were most often associated with the Court of Shadows, but it wasn’t really surprising to see any in the Order of the Malefic Viper either.

“Follow me,” the dark elf said as she led Meira away from the “training room” she had been placed in. The purpose was for her to build up innate resistance to toxins and even upgrade skills related to detecting and eliminating toxins. It was a cruel method that allowed her to become a test dummy for poisons. In fact, she had even gained the Palate of the Malefic Viper skill.

Meira knew a proper test dummy would be incredibly useful and even valued to a large extent. She had survived the initial training and gained the skills required with her evolution. Right now, her only plan was to gain enough value to not be viewed as easily disposable.

After she had passed the initial tests, she had even begun being taught things related to the Order, and by her own wish, she had been put on a path she believed would give her the best chances: that of a servant.

Soldiers who joined the Order would also do well, but Meira had never been a fighter. She had grown up with a profession related to mining and a healing class that also offered plenty of toughness and vitality for her to help her family in the mines. This had made her resilient enough to survive the ordeals she had been put through.

Her mother had also insisted on teaching her things related to managing the clan and matters related to the household. It was knowledge she had cursed having to learn as she knew it was due to the young master of the Brimstone Conglomerate, but now that knowledge had allowed her to get a good evaluation from the instructors of the Order.

Which was why the next words of the dark elf higher-up were not unexpected.

“You have gained a permanent position, and your training ends from today,” the dark elf said as she led her forward.

Meira felt relieved but was worried about one thing... why was someone who was clearly C-grade or maybe even beyond bothering with leading her, a measly D-grade? Much less inform her directly?

“May I ask, where will I serve?” she finally mustered up the courage to say after a dozen or so seconds of silence.

The dark elf seemed to have just waited for her to build up the guts to ask as she answered: “You will be assigned a new master who will gain full ownership of you, and you will act as the personal steward of his residence. That, or whatever else he decides to do with you.”

She spoke with an uninterested tone as she still probed Meira's response. Meira could only shudder a little as this was what she had feared, but she tried not to display it.

Slaves like her could get many positions. They could get a job in an alchemy lab as test dummies, join larger experiments, be assigned to dorms as caretakers, or so many other places where servants were needed. The most sought-after positions were as a general caretaker or work in one of the brothels where survival was often always assured, and you even had the chance of catching the eye of someone influential.

But to become the personal servant of an individual was the worst. If you were owned by a collective, it meant no one could "break" you without repercussions. It meant you would retain some sense of autonomy as even if the institution owned you, no individual did, and this meant you could often just do your own thing as long as you did your job.

Having an individual master meant your fate relied solely on the whims of a person. You could be killed, tortured, or whatever else to sate that person's desires without anything happening, especially as the ones getting personal servants were the influential, talented, or powerful ones. Often all three. Moreover, what happens when the master dies or gets powerful enough to no longer need you?

There was also some opportunity in having only one master... but those were few and far between. In fact, the biggest hope was the master just forgetting you existed altogether. But she knew her likely outcome was far worse. All she could do now was hope she would get lucky.

"If I may, who will my new master be?" Meira asked, a bit hesitant.

"A human that just passed the entrance test and is from the newly integrated universe," the dark elf said.

Meira was at first a little relieved it would at least be a human until the next sentence came:

"One with a unanimous vote by the judges of the trial to have the highest level of importance placed upon him, so do not disappoint."

She instantly felt herself take a deep breath but once more tried to not let it show. For someone to get such attention meant he had to be outstanding. But as a human from a newly integrated universe, he hopefully was-

The dark elf interrupted her thoughts as she waved her hand, and an image appeared, showing a masked person with two piercing yellow beastly eyes that made a shiver run down her spine.

Instantly killing all hope of her new master being an amicable person. She was already wondering what her perhaps limited future would hold as she was led through a gate towards her new “home.”

Jake had discovered days ago that Sylphie could still communicate with him even across universes, which was nice as he had a constant feed of her adventures, including how she and her parents had now gone to the dungeon. Sadly it appeared the communication did not work out of the dungeon and had not worked while Jake was in his dungeon either, so for the next week, at minimum, they would be cut off. It sucked because he really liked updates from the cute little hawk.

Back in the Order, Jake was following Irin and all the others as he made his way over to Reika to walk beside her. They exchanged a glance that told Jake they were fine, which made Jake just walk in silence as they walked through the gateway.

They entered a large office with hundreds of people working, and it reminded Jake of some government branch with people running all over. Well, most just teleported or opened gates and stuff, so a magical government office?

“This way,” Irin the succubus said as she led them all over to a table with another demon sitting at. Behind him was a large black statue of sorts that looked to be made of obsidian or maybe some kind of crystal? Jake wasn’t sure, and his Identify didn’t render any results either. It depicted a robed figure with an outstretched hand with the palm facing upwards.

The demoness stopped in front of the statue, with the other demon also getting up, but it was Irin who spoke.

“This statue will serve as an exchange of your Entry Token to get a true Order Token. This token will serve as both your badge of identification and is useful, if not required, to do much within the Order and the Academy. Moreover, this token will be Soulbound to you and only you, making it impossible to use for anyone but yourself,” she said as she motioned for the male demon to speak.

He followed through as he spoke: “To exchange the token, merely place your Entry Token in the hand of the statue and proceed to infuse your energy into the statue. Do not resist the scan that then follows. This will transform your token into a true one, signifying you have become genuine members of the Order!”

Before anything else could happen, Draskil stepped forward and placed his token in the hand of the statue as he infused energy into it. A few seconds later, the Entry Token had transformed into a new one as he held it up. It was entirely black and looked like a circular-cut gem of some kind with the Order of the Malefic Viper motif on it.

The male demon looked with recognition as he smiled. Jake wondered why as Irin explained.

“The tokens are split into the ranks: White, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Black, and Dark Green, with Dark Green naturally being the highest. The tokens are also grade-specific, so each time you advance, you will need to get them re-issued, which may also result in getting a lower ranking. Or a higher one, of course. I will be honest, this color-coding is primarily cosmetic and will have little practical impact besides signifying your status to others easily,” she explained.

Jake and everyone nodded, but he noticed no one else stepping forward. Instead, a few glanced his way. It turned out that skipping queues was also a benefit of being strong as Jake gladly stepped forward and did the same thing Draskil had done. Original content can be found at [novel●fire●net](https://www.firenet.net)

He felt the statue scan him, but the moment it tried, it impacted Shroud. Jake was quick as he deactivated the Divine skill, letting it through. The scan still took a second more than usual, getting an odd glance from the demon in charge of it, but he quickly calmed down when it spat out a new black token.

Jake had feared he would get a Dark Green, but it appeared he would at least avoid that attention. He stepped over to where Draskil was as they exchanged another glance. Both were staying to see who else would get black tokens, and moreover, to see if they could find the mysterious one who got a higher grade than them. Also... clearly, none of them had any idea where to go.

He took this time to inspect his new token after binding it to himself.

***[D-grade Black Order of the Malefic Viper Token (Unique)] – A token signifying you are a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper. This token holds info regarding your identity and details about your person, as well as a plethora of other useful functions, including but not limited to information storage, gateway access, event participation, formation control, contract services, and residence services.***

### ***Requirements: Soulbound***

It felt simple yet incredibly complex. Jake was also confident the token was borderline unbreakable. When he checked it further, he also felt the knowledge in the Entry Token had all been transplanted onto this new one, along with a lot more information about the Order and whatnot.

He didn't have more time to scan it as a commotion was made as an unimpressive level 111 Risen got a black token. The highest level Risen also went up right after and got another black token as four more Risen followed who all got gold ones. Six Risen had arrived at this test, and of them, two had black ones and four golden, which was far more than any other group.

The Harpy, who was the last to complete the test, also went up and got a black one as all the other leaders of the higher-level groups got golden tokens. Reika only got a bronze token, as all but one of the alchemists with her got white ones. Jake didn't know if he should be happy or sad that at least one other alchemist from Earth managed to get bronze, but oh well.

This, in the end, meant that five total black tokens were given, and the mysterious top-performer was either one of the two Risen or the Harpy. Jake glanced at all three, and his instincts were pretty clear as he met the eye of the level 149 Risen.

*Him.*

He was certain. It was a mere fraction of a second, but Jake's intuition was clear. Because for a moment, Jake felt a response from Sense of the Malefic Viper as he looked at him that practically screamed that the Risen before him was akin to a walking natural treasure of pure toxicity.

And not online video game kind of toxicity.

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## Chapter 417: Rules & A Very Good Question

Once every person had gotten their tokens, there was just one more round of orientation before all the students would be let loose. Jake followed behind again as they were all led back to the old waiting chamber and quickly went into new "camps" of sorts based on the level of their tokens. It was a bit odd in Jake's mind to put yourself into a box based on colored crystal tokens.

"So, as a final thing, let's have a small orientation," the succubus began once everyone was back in position. "Let us start with some basic ground rules of the Order of the Malefic Viper, more specifically, the rules while part of the Academy. Do note that the Academy is but one branch of the whole Order, and entry into the Academy also means membership of the Order, so you will all have these imposed on you while on Order ground.

"Membership of the Order and Academy can naturally be rescinded at any point by you or as punishment if you break any rules."

With those words, a large screen was projected in front of all of them with a small list of six rules.



1. Guests of the Order of the Malefic Viper shall be treated as members for all subsequent rules.
2. Killing any member of the Order within common grounds is strictly prohibited. Killing any member of the Order within their own or a residence they have been allowed access to is strictly prohibited.
3. Destruction of property is strictly prohibited and will result in severe punishment partly determined by the damaged party. Slaves, pets, servants, and other auxiliary living creatures under the control of a member of the Order fall under the umbrella of property. If these creatures break any rules, the owner will be punished accordingly.
4. Theft of property from any member of the Order is strictly prohibited.
5. Unauthorized entry into the residence of another member of the Order is heavily disincentivized and can lead to punishment.
6. Any case of perceived injustice can be brought to an Order official, and it will be processed. Punishment will, if proven correct, be subjectively determined. If the plaintiff is found in the wrong, punishment will be served upon them instead for wasting the official's time.

Jake read them over and was surprised at how little there was and how basic it was. It was basically just saying not to kill, steal or destroy the stuff of others and if any of these things – or anything else you didn't like – happened to you, to just go complain to an official and hope they take your side or get fucked yourself.

"The rules are purposefully simple as honestly having a long list serves little purpose. Ah, and before anyone gets any fancy ideas, then guardians of the Order are always present and actively observing any non-residence at all times, so assassination attempts tend to not work very well. Now, any questions?" Irin explained as she asked with a light smile.

An elf in the room raised their hand as she acknowledged him. "What happens if a servant acts of their own volition and breaks one of the rules?"

"Depends entirely on what happens and how the judge in question feels that day. If they think you had something to do with it, everything from being told it was a fun idea to getting your entire homeworld destroyed can happen," Irin shrugged.

A few hands were instantly raised at that as the succubus took the initiative to explain.

"While these rules exist, don't think for a moment they are absolute. Punishment is entirely determined by those in power, and with enough influence and power, you can do borderline anything. You can't all seriously think anything would happen if an A-

grade feels annoyed and decides to erase some weak white token D-grade academy student, can you?"

She chuckled a bit at the sentiment, but the mood in the waiting room did not seem to agree with her as people now looked a bit more worried than before. Reika also frowned, and the only ones who looked relatively relaxed were Jake, Draskil, and the Risen.

"Ah, don't act like that," Irin said, shaking her head. "It isn't like there is anything in it for some powerhouse to slap you to death, and chances are they will get a slight punishment, like paying a fine or something and don't flatter yourself to truly think you are worth that to them. Of course, there are a few ways to more or less shield yourself from anything. Like being associated with another force of the multiverse."

Irin said this part as she referred to the Risen.

"Or, the best of all, carry the blessing of the Malefic One himself, or perhaps just someone subordinate to the great Patron."

That last part was naturally said as she motioned towards Jake and Draskil, as well as a few others. In fact, most leaders of factions had low-level blessings from the Viper, but all of them besides Jake and Draskil had only the Minor one. Jake acted like he also had only a Lesser one, but Draskil truly stood out with the Divine Blessing.

"There is also the option of finding an internal faction to align yourself with, or you could just not mess with people you shouldn't mess with. If you feel like things aren't fair or work as they should, get strong enough to fix it or adapt, we clear?" Irin said as she looked around for any other questions.

A female scalekin of some sort raised her hand and asked: "How will lessons in the Academy work?"

"Says in the information package within the token. Next?"

This led to a few seconds of silence as everyone clearly scanned their tokens not to ask any more questions, only to have them be shut down. Jake did the same thing, but only some of the surface stuff as he would dive into it later. Besides, it wasn't like he planned on asking any questions right now.

"Where are the personal residences of those with three stars or higher located?" one of the leaders with a gold token asked. Jake guessed gold meant either high-end three-star performance or maybe early four-star too? Either way, gold surely had to mean personal residence.

"Within the Order itself, but the exact location not that easily discerned as it is underground, hidden by formations and spatially expanded," Irin answered. "Also, to

answer the obvious follow-up, your token is already linked to your residences, and simply by activating any of the gates spread throughout, you can enter it. The token is also used to leave it again. Each residence is placed in a neighborhood of sorts with individuals roughly around your level, but don't fret, each residence is individually isolated by formations and barriers."

That did seem to answer a question many had, but someone else did raise their hand: "How will the shared dorms work?"

"You will all have individual rooms. Ah, in comparison, the ones with three stars above will have entire courtyards with several buildings, also giving ample space to house your servants or followers. It is also entirely possible for those with residences to just have others come stay with them if they so wish; it's all up to them. And no, if you live in a dorm and expect to have personal servants, rethink your status and get a residence first," Irin answered curtly again.

By now, Jake was just waiting for it to be over. He did throw Reika a glance across the room, but she subtly shook her head. He wanted to see if she had any interest in sharing his residences as he assumed he would get a big one, but she declined. Which was a-okay with Jake.

He had never tried living with a woman before besides his mother either, so it was good to avoid that awkwardness.

The orientation only continued for a few more minutes as some more simple questions were asked. After that, a few people began going around and talking to others, which was when Jake discovered the tokens also worked as phones within the Order to contact one another. It was truly a multi-purpose tool.

Jake naturally exchanged his number with Reika and found that the number to Irinixis was already inside. Well, Jake said number, but it was more like a token signature bound to the inherent mana and soul signature of the other person owning the token, making it far more secure and borderline impossible for anyone besides the two speaking to intercept the signal.

Anyway, Jake decided to keep calling it a number as that was just easier.

A lot of people came up to Jake wanting to get his contact info, primarily the other humans, but he declined all of them. Draskil was once more the first to leave without getting any numbers as he went over to a wall with a small magic circle on, held the token up, and made a Malefic Dragonkin-sized gateway appear. He stepped through, and the moment he did, it closed behind them.

More mimicked this as the room began emptying out. All of the Risen went together to one residence, it appeared, while Jake had a brief talk with Reika where he learned she would be with the one other bronze token alchemist while the others from the clan

would be by themselves at their respective dorms. She also informed him one of them had died during the dungeon, which Jake had kind of guessed since one didn't return.

With everything handled, Jake said his goodbyes as he went over to a wall. Before he left, Irinixis quickly came over and stood beside him. "I wish you a good time in the Academy and Order, and remember to call if you need anything, okay?"

She said the last part with a wink as she scurried off again. Jake did wonder why she showed him special interest. Well, a special interest that she didn't show the other people with outstanding performances. She hadn't tried this with Draskil or any of the Risen but seemed to only focus on him. Maybe she just didn't find Scalekin or Risen to her liking?

Jake didn't bother thinking about it more as he activated the token and made a gate open. It was instinctual and easy to do with the token, and when he stepped through, he didn't feel any discomfort or even movement of space. Whatever space magic was going on was at an insanely high level.

As his head went through the gate, he instantly saw the sunlight and the lush green courtyard before him with a large house standing atop some stairs. It had a black glass façade, and Jake instantly felt a bit weird looking at it because it looked too... modern?

He looked around and saw the garden in front of it as his Sense of the Malefic Viper reacted to the herbs. *Good for potions*, he noted. Entire flowerbeds were lining the perimeter of the house with a large lawn of sorts with trees leading up to the house. It looked like a modern mansion.

It should also be noted that all of the observers Jake had felt while in any of the common areas were gone. In there, the only one he knew was still looking from the outside was a certain snake god. So that was nice for privacy, as at least there were no longer a dozen hidden powerhouses looking at all times. However, he did also feel something from the residence, but the aura felt weak.

Walking forward, he took in the sights and looked up to see the bright sun and a blue sky above. He instinctively knew it was not a real star, but it was really fucking close. As in, Jake didn't doubt there was an actual celestial object above; it was just made by someone supremely powerful.

Jake finally took his time to inspect the house himself as he walked closer. Mind you, he needed to walk closer as the walkway with grass and trees on each side was several hundred meters long, making his sphere not reach.

As he got closer, he saw the interior and the modern look continuing. Tiled floors, concrete walls, glass facades. He even saw modern-looking furniture, but he didn't really consider it as he also spotted someone in the mansion's entry hall - the one observing him.

He hurried a bit over and opened the large door leading into the house, only to be met with a large open hall with a tall ceiling with several large sculptures giving off light hanging from it. However, what he focused on was the person in front of him.

“Welcome, Master,” she said as she knelt on the ground. Jake instantly used Identify as he frowned.

### [Elf – lvl 109]

She looked young, maybe in her early twenties, though to be fair, all elves he had ever seen looked young. She had the usual pointed ears and a generally slender build too. She was wearing a white dress that didn't cover as much as it probably should, and the way she was pressing her head against the floor rubbed Jake the wrong way.

“Thanks?” Jake answered tentatively. “May I know who you are?”

He had expected no one to be present, so of course, he was surprised at finding someone there.

The elf raised her head to look at Jake as she answered. “I am called Meira, Master.”

Meira, as she was called, looked a bit surprised at Jake's response, but she also clearly tried to hide it. Not very well, but she tried. Jake looked her over again, and his gut reaction was that she had to be some noble elf or something, right?

She had long blonde hair, a slender build, deep green eyes, perfect features, proportions where it mattered... she looked straight out of a fantasy, like those elven princesses out of video games. There was just one problem.

“Why do you keep calling me master?”

Once more, she looked a bit surprised as she nevertheless answered without missing a beat.

“I am here to serve in any way seen fit, so it is only right to use the title Master,” she explained a bit nervously before adding. “Naturally, if Master wishes for me to use any other title, I can.”

“No, I mean, why do you call *me* Master, and why are you here to begin with?” Jake asked.

“I was assigned to serve Master at his residence,” Meira answered, but her nervousness was clearly growing.

“So you work here?” He asked to confirm, frowning.

His frown was clearly picked up just from his eyes as she answered, sounding frightened: "I can do anything Master wants, anywhere he desires."

Jake's frown deepened as it clicked. He took out the token and scanned it over, finding a part of it he hadn't checked before. A contract. He briefly looked it over and saw what it was as he clenched his fists, and a bit of bloodlust seeped out.

He looked towards the sky, where he knew the god was looking. "Villy, what the fuck is this?"

Not a single part of him cared that he spoke out loud, and clearly, the Viper didn't either as the next moment, an aura descended. Pure power coalesced as a form appeared in the sky, and a humanoid scaled being floated down from above.

Jake stood unbothered by the aura as the Viper smiled in answer. "I was not the cause of-"

"Relax that fucking presence, man, look at her," Jake said as he motioned towards Meira, who was uncontrollably shivering while still kneeling. She looked like she was intermittently between passing out and being forcefully woken up by the Viper's presence as tears streamed down her face and onto the ground.

The Viper responded as the aura disappeared like it had never been there. He pointed at Meira as she stopped shaking and appeared to calm down. "Fine, fine. Geez."

"Now tell me... why the fuck do I suddenly own a slave?" Jake asked as he didn't bother controlling his own aura or presence in the slightest. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT ***novel•fire•net***

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## Chapter 418: "The Positive Side"

Meira waited in the entrance hall after she had changed her clothes out of the ragged robe and cleaned herself up. She had even set her hair and tried to look as representable as possible for her new master to arrive. Not a single part of her doubted the first impression would be important, so she wanted to look and perform her best.

She knew it would be a good while before he arrived, so she had gone through the mansion. There were seven buildings adjoining to it, including a large lab, two

greenhouses, three more residential buildings, and a large warehouse of some sort to be customized by the new owner.

The main mansion was massive with dozens of rooms, three stories not counting the underground, and everything looked incredibly well made. It was like the buildings of the Brimstone Conglomerate and only hammered home that her new master was a person of influence.

Meira had gone through everything in preparation for him to arrive. She had located the meditation chamber, the formation control room, the relaxation rooms, and even the bed-chamber. Considering D-grades no longer needed to sleep, the use of that room was obvious, especially with a bed that large, made to accommodate several people at once.

Once everything had been gone through, she had returned and was now waiting in the entrance hall. It took only an hour more before something happened. At the entrance to the courtyard appeared a single figure wearing black clothes and a mask. She looked through the one-way glass out and the door leading into the mansion as she subtly tried to study him as he also stood still and appeared to observe his new surroundings.

Soon enough, he began walking towards the mansion. Meira had already gone over hundreds of scenarios in her head of how this first meeting would go and felt as prepared as she could when he went through the door and laid eyes on her.

“Welcome, Master.”

She said the words with as much servility as she could, making sure to keep her head low to make it absolutely clear she knew her position.

“Thanks? May I know who you are?”

His answer was unexpected, especially his tone as she felt genuine confusion. His voice also seemed very relaxed and not as intimidating as she had feared. She dared raise her head as she met the admittedly frightening yellow eyes, but she tried to keep her cool as she answered.

What followed was even more confusing as Meira introduced herself, and her new master kept asking probing questions. At first, she began to believe it was a test for her to prove she truly recognized her position, but that became doubtful as he kept sounding so genuinely perplexed.

This wasn't good. Meira's new master had clearly not expected her to be there. Meira tried to calm herself down and make it clear she would be useful, but he kept seeming dissatisfied at her presence. If he decided to throw her out...



“Villy, what the fuck is this?” he suddenly said, as an aura of bloodlust poured out, making Meira shiver. Who was this Villy? What was-

Then suddenly, she felt something else. Like the entire world stood still, and an utterly oppressive aura appeared. Every fiber of her being cried out as she shivered, her mind unable to comprehend what exactly was happening. Yet she still knew... instinctively she knew, after spending so long within the Order, seeing the statues, and being bathed in their aura:

It was the Malefic One.

Her mind was jumbled as she couldn't comprehend what was happening. Meira's psyche was in disarray as the aura weighed down on her, and she felt herself slip in and out of consciousness, but she was mercilessly forcefully awakened again and again. She felt like death was upon her, tears streaming down her face as she wasn't even able to open her mouth to beg for merc-

“Relax that fucking presence, man, look at her!”

Meira barely registered the voice of her new master, but it shocked her nearly as much as the appearance of the Primordial. How could he... how did he-

“Fine, fine. Geez.”

The words sounded not like they came from a god but just a person. As they were spoken, the presence crushing her subsided as suddenly it was like the god had never been there. She almost wondered if he had left, but her master's next question confirmed it wasn't so.

“Now tell me... why the fuck do I suddenly own a slave?”

Bloodlust assaulted her as Meira shivered again. It was more than she could take as she almost blacked out from sheer fear. It was different than that of a god... if the aura of a god made you feel like you could die at any point, the aura she was currently feeling made her think she would be killed at any moment by something just as scary as any diety. It seemed the same on the surface but was vastly different. Her mind was barely able to comprehend that the bloodlust was partly directed at her and the sentiment behind the question... he wanted to get rid of her.

“Now look at what *you* are doing!” the Malefic One spoke.

A moment passed as the bloodlust also subsided, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Meira could breathe again. Yet she was still shivering and crying as hopelessness and confusion dominated her mind. She couldn't comprehend what was happening, but she knew she was the cause of it. She knew her new master was

unsatisfied with her presence. As for why the Malefic One would suddenly appear... it almost felt like this was just an illusion, or maybe she was already dead?

"Sorry about that," her new master said as she suddenly felt herself be helped up. Meira looked up and saw the scaled figure stand behind the masked man helping her as she shook at the sight.

"Hey, hey, relax," her master said as she was gently pushed down, and she felt herself sit on some kind of chair. "Deep breaths, everything is fine."

"Great, see you later the-" the Malefic One began.

"No, we aren't done!" the human said as he turned to the god. "Now explain to me why the hell this is a thing?"

Meira just stared as she desperately tried to understand what was going on. How could a mortal yell at the Malefic One? Why was the Malefic One here to begin with? Why did the Primordial not seem offended or to care?

She was just lost for words as all she could do was try to make herself smaller and hope to fade away as the two began talking right in front of her.

Jake had a damn headache as he shifted between looking at Villy and the poor elf that looked white as a ghost and like she was certain death was right around the corner. He always forgot how much the aura of a god really wore down others, and Villy had clearly not bothered holding anything back.

Villy looked at Jake as he explained. "I tried to tell you before, this has nothing to do with me. Do you really think I descended down and ordered what kind of slave you would get? No, my interfering would only have been for you to not get one, as it is customary for one with your performance. It was entirely done by members of the Order, following regular procedures."

"Leads to the question of why the hell that is a procedure," Jake shot back.

"Think about it a bit. Think about why I have no qualms descending before you and talking openly like this even with her present. Think about how no one else can observe within this residence – besides me, of course – and consider why the only assistant provided by the Order is a slave. It all comes down to the basic principle of trust," the Viper explained.

Jake had taken a deep breath as he calmed himself a bit and let the Viper keep talking.

"As a member, you might need assistance to handle some things within the Order. Maybe you need someone to fetch you alchemical materials, deliver a message or an invitation, or a plethora of other mundane tasks not worth your time. A slave like this can

also help you in the alchemy lab as a great test subject, take care of your garden, or just help you relieve boredom. The point is, having someone so close and working with you will inadvertently lead to them finding out some of your secrets and have access to valuable items you own. This is ignoring the fact that it would be annoying and stressful to constantly be on watch within your own home. A slave like her fixes all that as there is no threat of a leak or that they act against your interests,” Villy kept explaining.

The Viper seemed to be finished with his point, but Jake still stood annoyed. He didn’t like it nevertheless, and when he looked at the elf just staring down onto the ground, trying to hold back her tears and biting her own lip, he just felt even shittier.

“I still don’t like it, and I don’t see any reason to repeat an old conversation on the topic. You know my stance, and you knew I wouldn’t like it. You could at least have given me a heads-up,” Jake said. “Why not just have it be a servant who signs a contract of confidentiality like Lillian did?”

“Why warn you when you should have been able to figure something like this out yourself? You knew the Order had slaves, and I can see you even recognize why it makes sense. As for why it is not just a contract? Well, those contracts have the huge issue of being limited in scope, impossible to revise without consent from both parties, and can even be circumvented in many cases through smart wording or even just mental manipulation. Like if someone made an illusion to make them look like you perfectly, that girl on Earth could spill the beans and be none the wiser. She would still be hit by the backlash after the fact, though, once she realized she was fooled, but at that point, the damage is done. That doesn’t happen with slaves, as the limitations are far more extreme, especially the kind deployed by the Order. In fact. Even if she was fooled, she would be unable to say anything as the system itself would make her clamp up,” the Viper explained. “Oh, and finally: for her own protection while within the Order.”

Jake didn’t bite into anything in the first part as he knew he had no legs to stand on when it came to arguing the efficiency of contacts and whatnot. Even the second part, Jake understood within a second. “Because of the rules?” THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY novel◇fire◇met

He remembered the wording and believed it wasn’t a coincidence it had used “under control” rather than any other phrasing.

“Bingo,” Villy smirked. “Attacking her would mean attacking an extension of you. Killing her would mean the destruction of your property, and dependent on how mad that makes you, it could lead to heavy punishment. Also, with the slave contract, everyone knows she would be useless to try and extract information from.”

“Even if I see the logic,” Jake said. “It doesn’t make me like it. I don’t need a slave and would rather just do all the mundane stuff myself rather than force someone else to. So just tell me how I break this thing. Just set her free and let her do her own thing.”

“Sure, I could do that,” Villy smiled agreeably. “But you should be nice and also just kill her right away then. That would be far kinder than release a freed slave within the Order only to be picked up by someone else with a, let’s just say, lesser moral character.”

“Just take her someone else then,” Jake argued. “Take her back to where she originally came from, or just on some weak world or something. I know Earth is not an option, but there should be plenty of places where a D-grade can thrive.”

“Probably. But why would I? I didn’t cause this mess, so why would I fix it?” the Viper said without much care. “In fact, I’m going, to be honest. The moment you called out directly to me, released your aura, and didn’t bother hiding anything anymore, that ship sailed. It isn’t like the memories can be scrubbed from her head, and I don’t trust any contract less than a soul contract that may as well be a slavery one to keep her quiet. Even such a contract would be proof in itself of her association with the Order or at least someone powerful at one point, leading to her life being messed up as a result. So if you truly wish to set her free, just know the likely result is death or worse.”

At this point, Jake wanted to punch a wall. He looked down at the elf as he regarded Villy again. “We both know that is bullshit. Shit, you can just place her on some fringe planet no one has ever heard about, and even if she knows some things, so what? I am the one at risk here if anything leaks, which is a risk I am willing to take.”

“You seem adamant, huh,” Villy said with a smile. He didn’t look angry or disappointed or really like this conversation was of any consequence but remained oddly neutral. Like he truly didn’t care what Jake decided to do. “But how about I propose another path?”

“What?” Jake asked.

“Let her decide,” Villy smirked.

Jake turned and looked at her again. Meira had kept quiet throughout after her shaking had stopped, and by now, she just looked down at the ground with empty eyes. She didn’t move even an inch and looked more like a statue than a person.

“Hey... you can speak your mind here. Nothing will happen no matter what you say, I promise,” Jake said, trying to assure her. She finally reacted as she looked up at him. Jake tried to be encouraging and had even removed his mask to look less scary, hoping that would help.

He also did all he could to hide how shitty he felt. Jake felt like he really was the bad guy with a young woman sitting and crying beside him as he stood there arguing with his snake god friend.

“Go on,” Jake urged her.

“Master, I-“

“Just don’t call me Master,” Jake insisted. It felt like something crept up his spine every time she said it. He had barely gotten used to being called Lord Thayne, so there was no fucking way he was having any of that “Master” crap.

She looked a bit taken aback as she managed to stammer out. “My... My Lord, please allow me to serve you in any way I can; I swear I will do my utmost to prove myself useful!”

Jake felt like she missed the point. “I said you can be honest. This isn’t a test or anything like that. You have my word. Nothing bad will happen, so speak freely. Do you have any family or a home to go back to or anywhere you want to be taken?”

Meira, however, stuck to her words. “Ma... My Lord, I am speaking true. I wish to remain within My Lord’s employ and prove myself useful.”

“Why?” Jake asked probingly.

“I... believe remaining under My Lord would be the wisest, and I swear I shall prove useful by any means possible,” she insisted again.

“And why would it be the wisest?” Jake also repeated.

“Man, Jake, think for a second,” Villy cut in. “Even the biggest idiot can figure out you are quite the personage with everything happening, so why wouldn’t she want to stay? Shit, I am sure that if people truly knew about you, there would be plenty of powerful people willing to enslave themselves to you by choice.”

Jake didn’t have anything to comment on that as he just groaned again. He looked down at the elven woman and saw she looked determined. In the end, he just sighed. “Fuck me sideways with a tire iron and call me a hippo... this is some bullshit.”

Villy just made a huge grin as if he had won something while the poor elf just looked utterly confused at Jake’s nonsensical outburst.

“Well then, I shall leave it to you,” Villy said as he bowed with exaggeration. “Think about it on the positive side... finally, you have someone besides me you can be perfectly honest with and not bother hiding anything. Even that City Lord you kept secrets from, so won’t it be refreshing to have someone you can vent to about your Bloodline, the annoying snake god that keeps bothering you, and even be a full-on heretic around?”

Jake looked over at him. “I thought you said you were leaving?”

“See, just like that!” the Viper said as he disappeared without a trace.

Jake just sighed for the tenth time today as he looked at the elf. She looked down on the ground again as she clenched her fists, and Jake honestly had no idea what the fuck to do or say as he found himself in one of the most awkward and uncomfortable situations of his life. He would much rather be fighting that damn Hydra again.

“Fuck me...”

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## Chapter 419: Conversations Are Hard

Jake stood there thinking and going over what the fuck to do next as he heard a meek voice beside him.

“If My Lord wants to...”

He wondered what she meant as he remembered what he had just said. Instantly the situation just turned more awkward as Jake facepalmed. “No... no, I mean fuck me for being in this situation... not to actually...”

For every moment, Jake got more and more sure Villy *had* to have known and even looked forward to this entire shitty thing happening. Jake could practically see him sitting there laughing his head off at Jake, trying to deal with his newfound circumstances.

Meira at least looked embarrassed too at her misunderstanding, but also a bit relieved and... disappointed? Nah, Jake definitely misinterpreted that.

She clearly wasn't going to break the silence either as she sat there unmoving, forcing Jake to take the initiative and try to make the situation just a tiny bit less awkward.

“Even using My Lord is a bit much. Just call me whatever you want, okay?”

“That would be inappropriate and disrespectful... wouldn't it?” she asked. The elf looked just as out of water as Jake himself.

Whatever game plan she had was clearly out the window long ago. They both had been tossed into a situation neither was comfortable with, and Jake would do his darndest to at least make it bearable.

“Where I come from treating others overly respectfully is odd, and if we are to live in the same residence, it will get old fast and just make everything weird. No, just call me by

my name Jake... well, I use the pseudonym Hunter while within the Order, but considering everything that happened before hiding my name seems pointless," Jake said as he tried to keep it casual.

Meira still seemed unsure as Jake doubled down.

"Look, I call the Malefic Viper by the made-up nickname Villy and sure as hell am not going to refer to him as Lord or whatever else people use, at least not in private. If I can do that, you can call a fellow D-grade by his name, can't you?"

That turned out to be a bad idea as Meira whitened even more and looked afraid something terrible would happen. Like divine retribution was inbound. She even looked towards the sky, but nothing happened as Jake once more tried to calm her down.

"He wouldn't have made me his Chosen and be so casual around me if he was going to smite me for that, now would he?" Jake said, really trying to hammer through he was a casual person.

"I... how can you?" she finally stammered out.

"We are friends," Jake just shrugged. "I know it seems weird from your point of view, but I am a bit of an odd person, so don't fret it, okay? Just relax and keep it casual and down to earth."

He really tried to seem approachable and friendly, but Jake seriously had no confidence he was making headway, and he wasn't only making things worse. He just wasn't built for this kind of thing.

His words also clearly didn't work as she looked as meek as before, now just mixed with a good dose of extra confusion. Jake thought a bit as he said: "Look, how about doing it like this. While it's just the two of us call me Jake, and when around others, you can call me My Lord or Master or whatever else you find appropriate, okay?"

She finally looked up but didn't even address what he said, as she stammered out: "Are... you the Chosen of the Malefic One?"

"Wait, you were hung up on that?" Jake asked, clearly not reading the flow of their one-sided conversation very well. "Yeah, I am, at least in the name. Maybe in function, too, as it is a unique title, so whatever way I act is how the Chosen acts? Either way, yes, I got the True Blessing from the Malefic Viper."

"How?" Meira asked again.

"Eh... a bit of a long story. Actually, not that long. We met after I did a Challenge Dungeon designed by him. He was a bit of a dick, to begin with, but we ended up vibing



and having a good time, and then at the end, he just sneakily gave me the Blessing,” Jake explained.

He saw her physically cringe back when Jake called Villy a dick, as Jake once more reiterated: “As the Viper said earlier, I am also a bit of a heretic, I guess? I like the Viper well-enough as a person and all, and we generally tend to have a good time, but I don’t really treat him like a god or whatever. Just know that he is fine with it. It is a bit interesting that I can be viewed as a heretic when the god in question isn’t really offended, but here we are.”

Meira fell silent again as Jake began to realize bombarding her with ridiculousness was perhaps not the best tactic of calming her down, and he didn’t feel like they were progressing much. Jake thus decided to take it as much down to earth as he could as he pulled out a chair himself and sat across from her.

“Meira, listen,” Jake said as he got her attention again. “Where I come from, slavery isn’t really a thing much anymore, and when it does happen, it is heavily frowned upon, and let me be perfectly frank: I don’t like it. At a fundamental and conceptual level, I despise it. I want to just rip up that stupid contract more than anything, not because of you, but just because of what it represents. However, it seems that would inadvertently lead to a shitty situation for everything and everyone except my own conscience, so I won’t. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it, and I swear I have no interest in treating you like a slave. As you are stuck here, we can figure out some working arrangements, but if you decide to just stay and chill in this huge mansion indefinitely, I won’t bother you. You can speak your mind whenever around me and treat me like just another person. In fact, I would prefer that over everything else, alright?”

That finally seemed to get a response as she looked up: “Please allow me to remain; I will do anything! I can-“

“I just said you can stay no matter what,” Jake interrupted her as he held up a hand. “What I am just saying is that for you to stay and the both of us to feel comfortable with it, we need to compromise, okay?”

She took a bit, but she slowly nodded.

“Great. So, ignoring anything else that happened, what do *you* want to do?” Jake asked. “If you weren’t bound by any contract that told you what you had to do, what would you be doing?”

Meira fell silent for a bit before she spoke. “I was trained and raised before that to be a good worker and able to assist someone else... I want to prove myself useful.”

It wasn’t an answer Jake hoped for, but he didn’t want to press anything more. “Okay, so what do you want to do here in the Order?”

“Work for Mast... m...” she looked a bit lost for words as she stopped talking and looked down again. She looked almost scared Jake would do anything, which only made everything worse. What the fuck kind of training and upraising did she have to think slipping up a few words would result in anything bad?

“Jake,” he said calmly.

She looked up.

“Just call me Jake, and I will call you Meira.”

“Okay...” she said as she fell silent again. It didn’t seem like she got the message.

Jake had a feeling he wasn’t really getting anywhere as she looked lost in thought again. Rather than keep pressing, he changed the subject as he hoped he had gotten his point through. At least enough for her to process it for the future.

“Alright, let’s do something else. I just arrived, so could you maybe show me around the place?” Jake asked.

She instantly prepped up, and as Jake stood, so did she.

“Naturally!” she exclaimed. “Where would Master like to go first?”

A second later, she realized as she paled, but Jake just acted like nothing as he gently corrected her: “Jake is just fine, and can you show me the lab first? I just got one made back home, and I would love to see the difference.”

She quickly nodded with relief as she led Jake forward.

Jake did have to admit he felt like he was walking on eggshells throughout the entire tour, and he did recognize the ridiculousness of the situation. However, he was confident that she would get used to him not being a shit person with a bit of time and patience.

Because damn, she had clearly assumed for him to be an absolute shitbag, which made Jake wonder how other slaves of the Order and the multiverse as a whole were treated.

Reika had used the Token together with Haruto, the other bronze token alchemist of the Noboru Clan. They had instantly stepped through a gate and appeared in a large entry hall leading into a massive hallway with doors on each side.

Several more people also followed after them as she and Haruto stepped out of the way to make space for two scalekins laughing as they went into two of the rooms a bit down the hall. In the entry hall, they soon stood a dozen or so people from the new batch from

the ninety-third Universe. A few had already gone and found their rooms, but Reika had chosen to remain for now.

“Excuse me,” someone finally said as a group of three fellow humans approached her and Haruto. “My name is Jiub, pleased to make your acquaintance. I wonder if I could have a moment of your time?”

This was what Reika had been waiting for, and she was glad she wouldn’t have to be the first one to approach someone.

“Reika, pleased to meet you,” she said as she returned his greeting.

“I couldn’t help but notice you seemed to be close with the sole black-token human?” Jiub asked, just as Reika had expected. “My Lord is a gold-token himself, and we hope to make some good connections here early on to make it easier for all of us.”

Reika nodded but did correct one thing. “I did indeed arrive with him. However, we are at most allies and do not hail from the same factions back on our home planet. I would prefer not to bother him with unnecessary matters unless absolutely required.”

She wanted to quickly establish a border but, at the same time, make it clear that she did have an amicable relationship with Jake in case something untoward did happen.

This did seem to disappoint Jiub a bit, but he still smiled. “Nevertheless, it is preferable for good relationships to form. I hope that in the future, we can work together and help each other strive in the face of adversity. How about we exchange contact information?”

Reika naturally agreed, even if she knew a big part of the reason was that they still hoped for an opening with Jake. She knew others had already seen her and Jake exchange contact information, so at worst, they would get someone who knew how to contact him. At best, they would get an in with Jake and even a valuable ally in herself and the members of the Noboru Clan.

After exchanging with Jiub, a few more came up to her with pretty much the same proposal. It was primarily other humans and elves, but a few scalekins and other peculiar races also came. Reika did not feel entirely comfortable with the less human-looking ones as she wasn’t sure how to act and even found herself inadvertently revolted by some of their appearances.

Scaled beasts with beastly looks and sharp teeth lining their maws, gilled creatures where the gills flapped as they spoke without the mouth opening, and a lot of other beings Reika could only have imagined out of horror films approached her.

At least she managed to keep a straight face, but she had to send Haruto away as he seemed even more uncomfortable. As she went through the exchanges, she couldn’t help but wonder how Jake seemed so completely unable to care. He had spoken to

scalekins and other races without batting an eye and never even mentioned to Reika and the others from Earth that they would encounter this kind of scene.

In fact, when she stood there looking down the long hallway of dorm rooms, it became apparent that humans, elves, and the very human-looking races were in the vast minority. Sure, when it came to those coming from the new universe, they were plentiful, but in the Order itself, they seemed scarce.

After she was finally done doing the political maneuvering, she went and found her own dorm room. She could open it with the Token like it was a contact-less hotel key. If she was being honest, she didn't carry many expectations and based on the hallway, each room had to be smaller than the average hotel room, which is why she was surprised when she entered.

A large open space opened up before her in what looked like a living room with couches, tables, and even what looked like a television or a projector. When she went further in, she found doors to a massive bedroom, a meditation chamber, an alchemy lab bigger than even the one back home, as well as a door leading into a large space that was split into three sections. The left and right parts were walled off by large glass panels in what looked like two greenhouses, with the middle part just general storage. To the left was a greenhouse with what she even recognized as a very small artificial sun, and in the other was a cave-like structure with several mushrooms and moss already growing inside. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON ***novel~fire~net***

Reika stood frozen a bit as she quickly used her Token to check in with Haruto and had it confirmed both their rooms were like this. She then checked in with the white token alchemists, and while their dorm rooms were a lot smaller, they still seemed extravagant.

This was when Reika truly recognized how absolutely loaded the Order of the Malefic Viper had to be, or at least how poor she and everyone on Earth was by comparison.

Vilastromoz hung back as he observed Jake a bit longer before moving on. At least for a little bit. Duskleaf at his side just shook his head at everything that had gone down.

"You could have easily barred him from getting a slave, even subtle ways that would raise no suspicion," Duskleaf said. "Or not stonewalled him at every point of the following discussion."

"I could, but I didn't," Vilastromoz said. "I think this is a good opportunity for Jake to face some of the less simple things in the multiverse. At least it is better than him visiting someone else in the Order and seeing them have slaves all-around and instantly create chaos."

"Could have been done in many other ways. This seems like an unnecessary extreme," Duskleaf insisted.

“Extreme would be me agreeing to free that slave and then let her run wild in the Order only to be picked up by someone with a taste for young elves and then show him what happened to her,” Vilastromoz said.

“That would get you a punch in the face,” Duskleaf said, glaring at him.

“I know, which is why I didn’t. I am not going to micromanage the Order, though.”

“But you do want chaos anyway,” Duskleaf noted. “You just don’t want to cause it yourself.”

“I would be fine making chaos by myself, but that would not lead to any worthwhile change... perhaps in actions, but not in mindset,” the Viper smirked.

“So you will use Jake,” Duskleaf asked. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, come on, he is a born agent of chaos,” Vilastromoz laughed as he failed to hold himself back from seeing Jake awkwardly hurry out of the bedroom during his little house tour after the elf had not-so-subtly hinted at what the purpose of the room was.

“And no matter what... I think Jake’s time in the Order should be interesting, to say the least.”

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## Chapter 420: Blaze It!

Jake sat in the meditation chamber as he went over some basic knowledge within the Token related to the Academy as a whole. He had wondered for a while how exactly an educational institution would function in the multiverse, much less an Order of poison alchemists, and the way it worked was rather, well, simple?

There wasn’t a curriculum or a set schedule of teachers and their lessons. There were no long-term lesson plans or forced subjects either; there weren’t even defined grades or “years” of any kind. It was all honestly weird from the perspective of someone from Earth who had gone through any kind of traditional education. He even saw that those teaching were, more often than not, also students themselves.

Classes and lessons did exist, of course, but you had to sign up to them individually, and they didn’t end with any exam or test or anything. There wasn’t attendance either,

but it would be stupid not to come to a lesson you had signed up to due to one other thing: Credits.

No, not Credits as in the standard system currency, but Academy Credits used to sign up for classes. Ah, but these Academy Credits could be bought using regular Credits and some other means. To attend a lesson cost these Academy Credits with the teacher getting a portion based on how much was spent by those attending.

It was a free-market capitalist dream-version of an educational institution with ample competition to get people to attend your lessons. Jake was honestly surprised at how everything worked and did question the efficiency of it, but then again... he had a feeling most members of the Order were selfish assholes, so they needed selfish motivations to do anything.

Lessons themselves were as varied as they came. Some were massive seminars where it looked like hundreds of thousands if not millions could attend, performed by powerful individuals on their own specialties, while others were one-on-one lessons and practice. The most popular form was smaller lessons with below a hundred people and often combined teaching and practical workshops.

Time was also a massive factor. Some lessons lasted a few hours while Jake saw one that said it had an expected running time of fifty years. It was one related to growing certain kinds of herbs and would seriously last fifty years based on the description without any breaks or anything in between. This seemed insane to Jake, even if he could see it really did not matter as the lesson catered to C- and B-grades, where spending fifty years wouldn't be that bad.

That was another thing. Jake could sign up for any lesson he wanted at any time, though most did have an advised grade. Shit, if he had the Academy Credits – or AC for short – he could attend the lesson of an S-grade if he so wanted. Maybe even a god at some point. Of course, it would be an utter waste as they would be speaking about way too advanced subjects, but it was an option.

As for what kind of lessons there were? Well, it would be a better question to ask what kind of lessons there weren't. Jake saw everything from rituals, potions, elixirs, all kinds of poison, everything related to herbs and natural treasures, including how to grow and find them.

There were even lessons on practical applications of poisons where one could use them on targets and observe their effects. Jake didn't like the sound of that but would rather do another kind of lesson: combat.

Yep, the alchemist academy had combat lessons too, and a wide variety of them. They were far less, and they were definitely not as popular from the looks of it, but many did also hold lessons in them. In fact, it looked like anyone could make their own lessons at any point for others to sign up for using the Token.



The Token was the root of everything and functioned as both a lesson plan and the only way of signing up for things. It also stored the AC and all the information regarding lessons. It even had a small spatial storage in it. Jake kept sitting in the room, tinkering with it a while longer as he went through some potential lessons for fun.

Oh yeah, while there weren't really any school years per-se, there were certain set periods where new members were recruited. Jake theorized this was for the ones making lessons to focus on stuff new students would need in those periods. In fact, he saw quite a lot catered towards newer students in the upcoming weeks, including topics related to general knowledge of the wider multiverse.

He also found many interesting classes on a subject that honestly shouldn't have surprised him. There were thousands total pertaining to languages. The reason why these were interesting was that he saw even E-grades who would hold these classes. Of course, with Tongue of the Myriad Races, such a thing was completely unnecessary for Jake. He and others from Earth had really lucked out there.

Jake had not decided on anything yet but would wait and probably take some of the ones aimed at people new to the multiverse. There were a few related to understanding affinities and what ones you were good at, which he especially wanted to give a go, as so far, he felt like he only discovered if he was good at something when faced directly with it.

He spent a bit longer going over stuff before he was forced to leave the meditation chamber again. Now, he was a bit reluctant to do this, as his sphere had made him aware Meira had been sitting outside the room for the last nine hours, completely unmoving as she waited for him.

Getting his shit together, he walked out. Meira stood up immediately when he exited and bowed deeply. Jake threw her a glance and asked: "I have been wondering, how much do you know about herbs and natural treasures and such?"

"I have been educated in both herbology and toxicology and possess skills related to both. In addition, I also have skills pertaining to Identifying and acquiring any kind of natural treasure requested, as well as the locations and methods of which I can acquire them within the Order," Meira quickly answered.

Jake was ninety-nine percent sure that response was practiced as he also bit onto another quirk Meira had picked up over the last day or so since Jake arrived: her ability to avoid referring to Jake in any direct way. It was honestly impressive how her way of dodging to use his name manifested as she found ways to string together sentences quite innovatively.

"Great, could you go fetch me some materials with Neurotoxin properties from the warehouse as well as some books related to neurotoxins from the library? Low-level materials and basic-level books only," Jake asked.



He had learned one other thing over these days... the only way to make any progress with Meria seemed to be to actually allow her to feel useful by making her do things. It was just small things, like asking her to show him where something was or maybe check up on the garden and make sure everything was okay or any other mundane task. Jake believed, perhaps wrongly, that with time she would learn he wasn't a dangerous person. Not to her anyway.

"Of course!" she swiftly agreed as she bowed and hurried off.

"Bring it to the lab!" Jake yelled after her as she turned and bowed again in acknowledgment before enthusiastically running off.

"Also gotta fix that bowing...baby steps..." Jake muttered as he went towards the lab. Hey, even if he was dealing with her, he would still get some work done, and one of the classes he really wanted to attend was related to Neurotoxins. Jake already used Hemotoxins and Necrotoxins quite a bit, but there were many other types.

Back before the system, Hemotoxins, Necrotoxins, and Neurotoxins were the primary ones found in nature, but with the system naturally came many more. Ethtoxins, also known as ethereal poison or soul poison, was something Jake had also dabbled in, but some toxins directly targeted mana, some that targeted stamina, and, of course, also ones for other types of energies. In fact, there were so many types of toxins it really wasn't a surprise there were alchemists who could reach all the way to godhood focusing on nothing else.

As he went to his lab, the Token vibrated slightly in his spatial storage as he saw Reika was calling him. He swiftly picked up as he answered in his best customer service voice: "Jake speaking, how may I help you?"

"... Is everything alright?" Reika asked in a worried tone as the joke didn't land.

"Yeah, I was just... never mind. So, how are you settling in?" Jake quickly moved on.

The Token really was wonderful. He was speaking out loud right now, but he knew it would also work using telepathy. Shit, the sound was even blocked, making no one able to hear their conversation either way.

"Things are fine here, and I must admit the accommodations are a lot better than expected. I had assumed a dorm would mean shared living space and possibly even communal alchemy labs and such, but we all have private rooms with everything one can need," Reika explained quite enthusiastically.

"Yeah, I sure ain't complaining either. Well, there is this one little thing, but I am working on it. Anyway, have you had time to check the lessons yet?" Jake asked.

“Oh, I have. I am coordinating with some of the others from the Noboru clan to take some lessons together. This is one of the reasons I contacted you as I wanted to relay our plans in case you wanted to join some of them too,” she asked as Jake’s Token vibrated in the spatial storage again.

He poked it mentally and saw a list had been sent. As Reika had said, it included the lessons, with most of them being elementary lessons Jake himself had looked at, along with a lot related to basic knowledge of the multiverse.

Jake wasn’t sure yet what to pick, but a few did seem interesting enough to join. He did, however, notice one thing: “How come only you and that Haruto guy will attend all of the lessons and not the others?”

“We lack Academy Credits, Jake,” Reika answered. “Those with White Tokens start with one hundred while Haruto and I started with a thousand each. We are already looking into ways of getting more, and it seems item donations will be the most straightforward method.”

Item donations were another way of getting more Academy Credits as naturally not everyone was suited for teaching or had anything worthwhile to teach. Of course, one would still require ingredients, but these could be bought with either normal Credits or through contribution points.

Contribution points could be earned by doing stuff for the Order. Fulfilling certain crafting requests, taking on quests from the Order, or holding a certain number of lessons with a good evaluation, as well as many other things. All in all, contribution points were given by contributing to the Order. Very complicated.

Honestly, Jake was amazed at how goddamn exploitative the entire system actually was. It was a bit like social media in that the users of the system were both the customers and the creators of the product. Sure, the Order did provide all accommodations, but the sheer income from donated ingredients, potions, elixirs, and all kinds of other alchemical products, had to be astronomical.

Jake had not actually checked his own total number of AC yet, and he quickly discovered an issue... he couldn’t find it. He tried mentally searching the Token, but there just wasn’t any registered to it or even a function to check how many he had.

He frowned a bit but chose to answer Reika either way. “Yeah, donations will probably be good. I am sure you and the others can find some niche to approach and make some sought-after creations.”

“That is what I am looking into right now, but it is hard, and as much as I hate to admit it, I doubt any of us from the clan have anything truly valuable to offer as of yet. No modern knowledge or anything like that seems applicable either, so all we can do is hope our talents match up,” Reika said with a bit of resignation.

“Worst case scenario, you stay in the Order for a while, learn some valuable things, and return to Earth better for it,” Jake said in encouragement.

“I know,” Reika said. “But it also feels like that would be a waste. This entire place is a treasure trove of knowledge and wealth. To not explore it as much as humanly possible would be a sin.”

“Well, then better get learning and improving,” Jake grinned to himself, perfectly understanding her thought process. The Order did indeed seem overwhelmingly abundant of opportunity. Because it was.

The two of them exchanged a few more pleasantries before they finished the call. It seemed like everyone was settling in, and besides the guy who died during the dungeon, all of the alchemists Reika had brought were bound to benefit tremendously.

Jake had already reached the lab by now, and as he checked through stuff in the Token some more, he spotted something. A special lesson would be held soon and had just been put up now. The name was dramatic and instantly caught his eye, nearly as much as the details of the teacher.

**Course Name:** Harnessing the flames of creations and destruction.

**Description:** A lesson on harnessing the flame within. Learn to control the flame born of creation and destruction to improve the use of Alchemical Flame. Through the use of Willpower and mobilizing the power found within your Truesoul, take control as your flames become a catalyst of creation and destruction alike. This course will also touch on the subject of integrating a Soulflame into your Soulspace.

**Teacher:** Albaromoz Emberflight (mid-tier A-Grade)

**Suggested Attendance Level:** N/A

**Duration:** 1x 10-hour session. The rightful source is *novel•fire•met*

**AC Price:** 420,000

As Jake focused on the teacher named, he got a description of that guy too. This was primarily to see if the teacher in question was qualified, and Jake had to say that a red dragon from a Dragonflight specializing in fire magic seemed quite promising. He also had a good evaluation, it seemed, and Jake was honestly interested, especially as it didn't require anything to attend. There was a lot of stuff he didn't fully get in the description too, but hey, he was in the Order to learn, right?

The only thing was the price... because when he compared it to something more targeted towards him, the difference was stark.

**Course Name:** Blaze it! Basic application of the Alchemical Flame for combat.

**Description:** A lesson on the basic applications of the Alchemical Flame to damage living entities and methods of using it with combat cauldrons as a weapon.

**Teacher:** Vkoras (Peak-tier D-Grade)

**Suggested Attendance Level:** E-grade, D-grade.

**Duration:** 8x 12-hour lessons.

**AC Price:** 5

This one was taught by a D-grade, but one that had been teaching for five years or so and was quite talented in using the Alchemical Flame and special combat cauldrons as weapons. Jake would only really attend this to see how combat using a cauldron worked.

The second lesson would begin in only six hours, while the one done by the dragon would start in two days, which was quite short notice, honestly. There was overlap with the second day of the Blaze It! Course. So even if one wanted to do both, one couldn't, not that Jake thought there was a huge crossover in target demographics. It had to also once more be noted that any course was a one-time buy-in, and it didn't matter if one attended every second of it or never showed up.

Jake looked these two over a bit as he checked the prices again. He finally failed to hold himself back as he asked:

"So... Villy... how do I see my Academy Credits?" Jake asked. He actually felt bad asking the god about such an elementary question and even more stupid for not figuring it out himself. Reika and everyone else had, who why the hell couldn't h-

*"You don't have any."*

"Wait, what?"

*"I mean, you technically don't have any, in the sense that everything requiring those Academy Credits are free to you,"* Villy explained, no doubt grinning on the other end.

"Seriously?" Jake asked a bit in disbelief.

*"Jake, even if we are best friends forever, you are still my Chosen. That is something that cannot be changed, and the Order is there to serve you, not the other way around. This is also why I should make something clear: this Order is your home turf. Your territory. Do whatever the fuck you want, damned be the consequences. If someone annoys you enough, kill them. If their ancestor tries to cause trouble, then remember*

*status and power trump all. And as my Chosen, no one besides me is above you in rank. If the veil of you being my Chosen falls, then so be it, it will eventually, just know that even before it happens, you are still the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."*

Jake sat silent for a while. He switched between frowning and looking thoughtful before finally speaking: "Well, that's nice. Guess I'll do the lesson by that red dragon then."

*"Do just that, I believe it could be beneficial for you to-"*

"After I check out how the hell a combat cauldron works. Maybe it even includes whacking people over the head."

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## Chapter 421: A Life of Punishment

Infinite Academy Credits was honestly overpowered and something any academy student would dream of. It meant Jake could attend whatever class he liked at any point, drop out if he didn't feel it, or just give a lot a go at the same time to find the one he liked the most.

However, it did give some quirks. Normally one could transfer AC to others, but Jake couldn't as he didn't technically have any. He couldn't pay for others either. Well, not other members of the Order anyway. Because Jake found one interesting provision in the rules of Academy Credit usage: nothing said Jake had to be the one attending. Not in that no one would attend, but that Jake in person didn't have to. It was entirely possible for Jake to send a clone or an avatar or, perhaps, a servant or a slave.

A plan formed in his mind as he waited for Meira to return. He went over some lessons while he waited patiently, trying to find some of the basic ones that would be good for an absolute beginner alchemist.

Villy had made it clear Meira would be screwed if she was just released due to her lack of affiliation with the Order. However, what would happen if, instead of just releasing her to the hounds, he had her become a member of the Order first? No rule he had seen said that wasn't possible, and if he was told he couldn't...

Well, Villy did just tell him to do whatever the hell he wanted, so it really wasn't Jake's fault, but the snake god who gave him the idea.

Meira had not had time to familiarize herself with the library before her new Master had arrived, so it took longer than she had hoped to get all the requested books. She didn't want to miss any but get all the ones asked for.

It was lucky she at least had been given a spatial satchel to transport the books in by the warden. It was far worse than a spatial ring or a necklace or any true spatial storage and required one to physically deposit the items by hand, but it was surely better than nothing. Her father had a similar one back home too...

She shook her head as she focused on her work. The ingredients had already been gathered and placed in a secondary bag made for the purpose of transporting toxic materials. As she went through the library index to double-check if she had gotten everything, a stray thought entered her head: *he probably won't be too angry if I missed one.*

Meira instantly caught herself in the act and slapped herself lightly. She couldn't let down her guard, and she had to perform perfectly. She had miscalculated so much already and made so many blunders... but... how could she have known?

The Malefic One had descended right in front of her. Her new Master was the Chosen of the Malefic One... it was as if she had just become the slave of the Hall Master... no, the Lord Protector? The mere thought was preposterous, even if she knew that was the truth.

Moreover, clearly, no one in the Humanoid Department knew anything about this. Meira had been informed her new Master was a very talented black-Token alchemist who had been marked with the highest level of importance during the entrance test. That in itself was already someone who she seriously needed to integrate herself with, but the Chosen?

It was like going from being told she was to work for a local Lord only to find out she was actually under the employ of the emperor. No matter the metaphor, she knew she had potentially struck gold, even if she was also in a very precarious position.

The only reason she was serving the Chosen was due to him wanting to keep his identity secret for reasons she didn't even dare ponder on. As a Chosen, he could have anything he wanted. There would no-doubt even be S-grades willing to become his servants as long as it meant a direct connection to the Malefic One. Who was she in comparison to any of them?

*No... you have the first-movers advantage,* Meira reminded herself. She would do anything, and nothing was out of the question, just to stay. If she somehow managed to endear herself to him, perhaps she would even find a way to help her clan back home as well as herself. No matter what, her new Master was a ticket to change her path of life in its entirety and allow her to survive. As long as she played her cards right and got lucky, that is.



After packing up all of the books, she quickly hurried over with the two spatial satchels to the laboratory. She hoped she hadn't been too slow as she got closer and saw the door open. She peeked in as she saw her Master sit on a stool as his hand burned with a transparent flame. He looked deep in thought, and Meira was afraid to interrupt whatever he was doing.

She still peeked, though. Her Master didn't look as intimidating without the mask, and if she didn't know better, she would view him as just another regular human. Naturally, that wasn't the case, but she did at least have the interpretation he wasn't a bad person. So far, he had only been nice towards her, but there was still that tiny sliver of doubt. One borne from the reality of where they were and how the multiverse worked.

The Order of the Malefic Viper was not a nice place. The Malefic Viper was not a nice god, and the path the alchemists belonging to the Order walked wasn't a nice one. So how would it make sense for the Chosen of the Malefic One to be nice?

Meira was still thinking as her Master turned to her and smiled, catching her peeping. A bit embarrassed, she quickly bowed as she asked: "Where should the books and ingredients be placed?"

"Ah, just leave the satchels here," he answered. "Tell me, have you ever done any alchemy before?"

"I have not," Meira answered, a bit perplexed at the question, but she assumed it had to do with her ability to assist him in his work. "However, I have been trained in the knowledge of alchemical work and gardening. I have also been trained to be an efficient subject of alchemical experiments if desired."

He frowned at her answer, making Meira instantly be alert. Had she been rude or disrespectful? No, she had not slipped up, had she? She had made sure to avoid using "My Lord" and "Master" as commanded and also naturally avoided using words such as "you" and the Chosen's name. Even if he had told her to, Meira had a suspicion it was a test of sorts to see if she would forget her place. Either way, she didn't want to risk it.

"Have you ever wanted to do alchemy?" he then asked.

A question Meira had honestly never even thought about.

Jake couldn't help but frown at her mentioning being used as a test subject for alchemical experiments so casually. She didn't even fucking blink when telling a poison alchemist to test his poison on her, making him wonder what she had been put through already to get that kind of mindset.

However, as fucked as it was, Jake had already learned she had Palate, so she had to have gained something from everything they had put her through. Moreover, he was



also confident in another thing that would help her if she decided to become an alchemist: Him.

Jake knew enough of the system by now to know that him merely being who he was would impact her positively. Of course, she also needed the drive to actually want to improve.

So when Jake asked if she wanted to become an alchemist, he observed her closely. He quickly got the feeling she had never even considered this question before, and she looked conflicted. Jake understood why as he added:

“Alchemy doesn’t have to be about poison either. It is one of the most varied, if not the most varied, profession-archetype of the multiverse. In fact, most alchemists focus on restoration and beneficial effects, with it also being very commonplace within the Order,” Jake said. He one hundred percent pulled the line about it being the most varied out of his ass. Hey, it was mega-varied, so it couldn’t be far off, could it?

“If requested, I can learn anything wished of me to the best of my abilities,” she answered after she thought for a while.

“You misunderstand,” Jake answered, shaking his head. “Do *you* want to learn alchemy?”

She didn’t answer right away as Jake continued. “Let me ask you this, what would you be doing if you hadn’t been enslaved by the Order?”

“I would be working in the mines of my clan or have been sworn to serve another,” Meira answered.

Jake was about to open his mouth again, but he felt certain she was telling the truth when looking at her. *Well, that was depressing*, he thought.

He realized he didn’t truly know anything about her, and looking at how long it was until the lesson on using cauldrons for combat would begin, he had some time to kill. Jake leaned back against the alchemy table he was sitting at and motioned for Meira to take a seat in another vacant chair.

“As you probably know, I come from a newly integrated universe, and I am actually quite interested... can you tell me a bit about how you grew up and life as someone born with the system?” Jake asked.

The phrasing of it being for him to learn about the multiverse was very purposeful as he didn’t feel like it would go over well for him to ask her to give her life story. No, this was better. It was only natural her explanation would be heavily based on her own experiences, so it was a real win-win as he also did want some insight into how

someone lived in the multiverse. As the conversation went on, he could then segue her into more personal details.

It worked as Meira, after only a bit of hesitation, agreed. She asked some clarifying questions and then began telling him about the life her clan had lived. She didn't say it was specifically how she had lived, but it was clear much of what she said was personal experience.

And... damn, Jake just got more depressed the more he heard. A clan of elves more or less enslaved by a more powerful faction because they happened to live close to a valuable mine. A life of servitude where the biggest concern wasn't progressing yourself and your own power but merely meeting quotas to avoid punishment.

In fact, Jake quickly began to notice a pattern of behavior and mindset in what she described. They worked the mine to avoid punishment. If a young lord – or just a lord in general – came and wanted something or someone, they would just give it to avoid repercussions. Levels were gained to keep up productivity. Professions and classes were chosen to be more efficient servants and make life less painful and difficult.

A lot of things regarding Meira suddenly became clearer to Jake. Many of her actions and why he repeatedly failed to make any headway made sense. He had a basic misunderstanding from the beginning based on his own mindset and worldview.

Meira didn't want anything.

Or, perhaps more accurately, the only thing she wanted was nothing. The only thing she wanted for her clan was nothing. Because to her, "something" had only ever come in one form: punishment. Her entire life, the life of her clan and everyone she knew, revolved around avoiding punishment. Apathy was the best they could hope for.

It revolved around survival and finding ways to not suffer. There was only external motivation that made Meira act as she did. Jake had believed Meira wanted something out of him from the beginning, but that now seemed wrong. Maybe she wanted him to help her clan, elevate her own status, or gain levels and such just by being close to him. But no, he got the impression that what she truly wanted was for Jake to just be accepting of her presence and otherwise leave her be. Perhaps view her existence as having some minor value, at least enough to not get rid of her.

Meanwhile, Jake acted purely on internal motivation. He didn't need power; he just wanted it. Meira needed power, for, without it, she would be punished. Even now, she didn't try to improve her situation with Jake, but only not to sour it. He realized his plan of making her warm up to him would never work as things were.

Jake kept listening as Meira talked. Her voice was rather emotionless at all times, and even when fucked up shit happened, she acted like it was pretty commonplace. With some pushing, she even talked about her training from the Order, and while she tried all

she could to not talk negatively, it was clear she had viewed things like training her Palate as something to endure and survive. It reminded Jake of how he had done the Trial of Myriad Poisons, which was similar but far more extreme and deadlier.

But while Jake had viewed it as a great way to improve Palate, she had viewed it as torture she needed to endure to survive. The difference could not be starker, and the thing is, Jake understood why. If Jake didn't view any power he got as truly his own, would he have been fine? Because Meira clearly didn't view her skills and her poison resistance as more than mere tools of survival that belonged to those in charge.

All in all, Meira didn't know the meaning of having agency. She had lived with fear of punishment as her primary motivator in life so far. Considering Jake had no plans on continuing that trend, she would have to find new motivation.

A bit more time passed as Jake just allowed her to keep talking. He didn't stop her at all but only answered a few of her questions. Questions that were all naturally related to if he also wanted to know about a particular subject.

When she was done, she just sat there quietly. Jake saw her nervousness and slight fear return when he didn't do anything but just looked at her a bit. He got up, and when Meira was about to also stand, he motioned for her to keep sitting.

"I think I have some understanding now. I am heading to a class right now, and while I am gone, I want you to go over these lessons and choose five you personally think are the most interesting," Jake said as he waved his hand and summoned a stack of papers. It took only a moment to imprint the simple information provided by each lesson using mana, as more than three hundred lesson descriptions were put down before her.

"May I ask under what parameters?" Meira asked, a bit unsure. Official source is *novel●fire●net*

"What you personally find interesting," Jake said. "Nothing else. Just choose five of them that you believe a novice alchemist should learn."

She frowned a bit but didn't ask. Instead, she just nodded and began going them over. Jake looked at her before he left the laboratory and went to the entry-area of the mansion, where a large magic circle was placed on the wall. Jake merely mentally poked the token in his inventory as the magic circle turned into a gate leading straight to where the lesson would be held.

Jake smirked a bit to himself as he prepared to finally learn how to bonk people in the head with cauldrons. In the meantime, he would even have Meira choose her own upcoming alchemy lessons, so he was truly being efficient.

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## Chapter 422: First Lesson

Jake stepped through the gate as he appeared at the back wall of what looked like a massive lecture hall. The hall had nearly a hundred meters to the ceiling and a large stage down at the bottom where Jake saw a dwarf that he assumed was the teacher. He was currently talking to a few scalekins as he showed off a cauldron to them.

The rest of the hall was already pretty filled. Jake looked around and guessed there had to be at least a few thousand present already, with more coming every second from other gates opening up all around him. A brief scan revealed around half of those present to be scalekins of different variants, with the rest a mixture of all kinds of races.

Everyone was E or D-grades, too, with the majority in D-grade. Jake decided to just find somewhere vacant as he took a seat, very curious as to how a lesson in the Order of the Malefic Viper would function. He did see many others already had cauldrons out and were tinkering a bit with them.

About ten minutes later, right at the assigned time, the lesson began.

The dwarf down on the stage stood before everyone as he spread out his hands. "Welcome to the first lesson of Blaze it! I ain't gonna waste your time with pleasantries but just get to the core of it. You all want to learn how to kill people using your cauldrons and Alchemical Flame, and I am happy to oblige!"

Instantly the very informal mood was set.

"Alchemical Flame is a cornerstone of alchemy that anyone who reaches E-grade as an alchemist possesses. We use it to control the temperature of the cauldron, salvage material, control concoctions, brewings, and so many other things. It is darn versatile, yet it has the weakness of being as useless as anything can get when it comes to killing things.

"Despite the name, the flame isn't actually related to the fire affinity whatsoever. However, that doesn't mean it isn't related to the concept of flames. Flames can come in many shapes and is more an expression of form, movement, and phenomena than anything else. A flame can be hot or cold, it can be corrosion incarnate or so full of life it can near-revive a damn Risen, but even then... it can't kill for shit, and even if you have a flame full of vitality, you won't be able to heal anyone with it. Because the Alchemical Flame is conceptually not made for combat, no matter how powerful it gets. Ah, but of course, we found ways around that, which is where combat cauldrons come in."

The dwarf wished over a cauldron as it appeared before him.

“Ya see, I ain’t got shit talent in fire magic and never did, but I was pretty good at controlling my Alchemical Flame. This is why I began working the path of combat cauldrons. We spent so long honing our flames that some have even been able to integrate a Soulflame to make it even more powerful, so not using it for self-defense or killing is just a damn crime.

“It is also a way to address the oft-seen disparity in class and profession level of a creator, and an even better method for those who only have a profession. Now, the design of the cauldron will naturally depend on what kind of flame you-“

Jake sat back as he listened to the dwarf explain more about what one had to look for. He displayed a bit with his own cauldron as he activated it. An odd brown flame was emitted from the combat cauldron, and he had someone bring in a beast trapped in a cage.

The brown flame moved over, and the moment it touched the beast, it began turning to stone as it was petrified within seconds. The dwarf then displayed how the flame did nothing to the bars around the beast and explained how one would need to carefully make sure the type of flame deployed would work against different kinds of lifeforms.

It was all very intriguing, but Jake quickly began to realize none of this was truly something he needed. There was nothing about the flame itself, but instead, it was purely how one could create or commission cauldrons capable of changing the nature of the flame and then use the cauldron as a catalyst. There would also be later lessons about how one could make use of the inside of the cauldron itself to further empower the flames by mixing in poison or other ingredients.

The funniest part of it all was when the dwarf explained one other thing, though... how to use the cauldron as an actual weapon. How the flame could be used as a tether, and he displayed himself attacking with the cauldron telekinetically and how one could infuse the inside with flames and release it in surprise attacks. The flames inside would also be able to infuse the cauldron with certain properties if it was well-designed, such as if one had a cold flame, then the cauldron itself could give off an intense ice aura and give frost burn to any it hit.

So, to answer Jake’s question, yes, part of using combat cauldrons was to bonk people with them.

However, finding it entertaining was all it ultimately was to Jake. It was clear this was aimed at individuals who were truly pure alchemists to give them a fighting chance by using their alchemy skills in combat directly. It required a special cauldron to function. Even if the dwarf teacher did say it was technically possible to make magic circles or tattoos in later grades to fulfill the same function, the reality was that what Jake already had was far better.

Jake could just make an arcane flame at any point using mana, and if he wanted to actually focus on improving that, he could get something far better. He had already mentally checked out when the dwarf mentioned something that caught his attention.

“Now, let me be clear, it is possible to integrate a Soulflame with innate combat potential that can be directly used as a weapon without any auxiliary assistance. However, these Soulflames will inadvertently also be far less useful in the alchemical process, so they are heavily de-incentivized. The only ones who should ever consider getting them are alchemists who have chosen to pursue paths where the Alchemical Flame is no longer vital.

“Not to say there aren’t Soulflames able to do both, but good luck getting one of those, much less control them. Leave those to the seniors, eh?” THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY *novel•fire•net*

There it was again. Soulflame. He had seen it mentioned in the descriptions of the lesson from the A-grade dragon too, and here it was again. The thing is, Jake had no idea what a Soulflame was. Granted, he hadn’t looked it up either, but it seemed pretty important.

Either way, the rest of the long lesson continued as there were a lot of practical demonstrations. Jake was not that into it as while the dwarf was at a higher level than Jake, and his skills in using the Alchemical Flame were phenomenal, he was still weak for his level. Clearly, a very pure craftsman, which Jake was definitely not.

When the lesson was over, Jake left along with everyone else. He could have gone earlier, but he wanted to stay out of respect for the teacher and also to give Meira some time to check the lessons and decide.

Going through the gate back to his mansion was as easy as getting to the lesson. Honestly, it was almost too convenient. Jake could go to any lesson and straight back home easily at any point. This did mean Jake had no fucking idea where he was or went on any geographical or even spatial level. He would have no way back if the gate didn’t activate after a lesson.

Jake walked back towards the laboratory, where he found Meira already awaiting his return. She bowed when she saw him, as he took the initiative to speak first.

“Did you choose the five most interesting ones?” he asked.

“Yes!” she said as she went over to him. She knelt down as she held up five pieces of paper like they were the holy grail. Jake groaned internally at how she acted but took the papers nevertheless. He looked them over quickly and was in two minds about it.



The first one she had picked was called Concocting For Beginners: Tricks and Methods For Novice Alchemists. Which was, for all intents and purposes, a damn good choice. The second one was, however, not as good:

Etiquette & How To Identify the Ideal Master.

It was a lesson about how one could get the best teacher and how to act properly around them. Jake had not even skimmed it before handing Meria the paper before, but it was really some weird shit. It included details of how one should endear themselves to a more powerful alchemist to learn from them and even included tips and tricks on some unsavory stuff to gain favor, aiming specifically at males and females going for a master of the opposite gender. How the hell Meira thought this qualified as “interesting” was above him.

Actually... it was kind of interesting, but not in a good way.

The third lesson was about the importance of finding a path in alchemy and what you were good at. Jake also agreed on that one as a good choice. In fact, it was the best of all the options. It was more a philosophy lesson and workshop to realize what you truly desired and practical tests to see what one was talented at.

The fourth was about gardening. A bit boring, but Jake could see it make sense. Finally, the fifth one was a bit... well... Jake understood, kinda, but that didn't mean he agreed on a lesson named “Walking In the Divine Shadow of the Malefic One: Power Through Devotion.”

Jake had taken his time as he looked them over. He then regarded her and asked. “Can you explain your reason behind why you think these are interesting?”

He had chosen the word interesting very purposefully. He had not said required or even useful, just interesting.

“I chose the first one because it touches on essential subjects an alchemist of the Order will no doubt need down the line, and it can help create a strong foundation.”

She had clearly expected this as she explained herself. Jake agreed on the first one, but he did notice one issue. Meira had misunderstood who it was supposed to be interesting for. She maybe had the assumption this was for some subordinate of Jake or something, and while she wasn't entirely wrong, she was off by a good margin.

“And why is it interesting?” Jake asked clarifyingly.

“Fundamental knowledge is naturally essential for an alchemist starting out, and with the Order's focus on toxins, it an ideal choice,” Meira explained.



*She still doesn't get it*, Jake sighed. She simply didn't seem to get what interesting meant. She kept talking about the usefulness and not why something was interesting. Jake would have said it was interesting because concocting more effectively would allow him to make better poisons that would then allow him to hunt stronger prey. It would expand his horizon of game.

"Let me ask you this, why would you want to learn to concoct poison better?" Jake asked. "And in this case, "you" does refer to you in particular. Why would Meira want to take this lesson?"

This question seemed to effectively stunlock her as she failed to answer for a good five seconds. She finally spoke after half a dozen seconds with confusion: "I am not sure this one understands the assignment? If it is wished of me to learn concoction, I will naturally do my best to—"

"No," Jake interrupted. He waved his hand as he sent the five papers with lessons on them back on the pile on the alchemy table with the others. "Take the lessons again and look them over. Choose five *you* think are interesting. Not that you think will be interesting for an alchemist of the Order. Choose five and explain why they are interesting to you. You have three days to pick them, and you can come to ask me questions in the meantime if there is something you are unsure about, okay?"

Meira looked even more perplexed, if not downright scared, especially after he had interrupted her. She quickly bowed after he was done talking. "I apologize that I failed my task and will accept any p—"

"I never said you failed or that you did anything wrong, just for you to do it again in a different way," Jake interrupted her again. "Now, is there anything you don't understand?"

She was silent for a while, clearly hesitant to ask before she finally built up the courage. "If I may... this one fails to comprehend why her insight will have any meaning or value in identifying lessons?"

Jake felt a bit happy as she finally had the guts to question something. Sadly for her, this was not a question she would get a straight answer for, at least not yet.

"You will understand in time; just know I have my reasons," Jake said.

Which seemed to be a perfectly adequate explanation for her as she nodded and bowed in acknowledgment. She went over to pick up all the papers but looked a bit lost as Jake quickly knew why.

"The western residence."

She looked at him questioningly as if expecting an order.

“From now on, the western residence is yours to use as your personal living space. Go there and fulfill your task, alright?” Jake asked, knowing she would naturally agree, even if she didn’t seem comfortable. Jake could kind of get why.

Each of the residences was their own mansions full of luxury, and she probably didn’t feel like it was right for her to get one. But it wasn’t like Jake had other people who needed them, and if he was honest, he didn’t want her shadowing him all the time or hanging around outside whatever room he was trying to chill in.

It may not matter for others, but with Jake’s Sphere of Perception, it was just distracting and unsettling.

She luckily didn’t try to argue this point but just picked up all the papers. She bowed one final time as she spoke. “Simply call this one if there are any tasks to be done, and I will come immediately.”

“I will call you. In three days. Now go and look them over and truly consider the choices as if you were choosing the path of a close friend, a relative, or even yourself,” Jake once more clarified.

Meira bowed one last time as she left, finally giving Jake some alone time as he did what any young, healthy male would do when alone.

He picked up the spatial satchel of neurotoxic material and began making a stew in his cauldron using the Alchemical Flame to heat it up as he played with it a bit with inspiration courtesy of the lesson earlier. At the same time, he also began looking over the books Meria had brought as he decided to get some light reading and poison eating in before it was time for his second lesson on the Alchemical Flame.

But this time, it would be with dragons.

Or, well, at least one dragon.

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## **Chapter 423: Willpower, Flames & Dragons**

Meira sat and stared at the pile of papers within the western residence as she had been ordered. However, she was utterly lost as to what was expected of her. The assignment simply didn’t make any sense. She had done as asked the first time around already, but that was clearly unacceptable.

The problem was she couldn't figure out what would be acceptable. She began shaking a bit at the thought. She hadn't even served her new Master for a few days, and she was already disappointing him and failing tasks. Perhaps she simply wasn't good enough to comprehend what he asked of her? Was there some profound reason or deep meaning behind the task he wanted her to see?

There was only one thing she felt relatively sure of: this was a test. It had to be. Was it a way to scout out her thought process and evaluate if she was suited to serve? Maybe it was just as simple as him wanting the insights of a nobody like her because he valued perspectives widely different from his own?

She recalled the final thing he had said about if she had to choose a path for a sibling of hers. She had two sisters and five brothers, but her brothers were already set in their paths as builders and miners, while her two sisters were naturally trained to be married off or sworn to another faction or influential family.

But, what if she had to pick lessons for them? They didn't know anything about alchemy, but would it do them good to learn? Were they even talented enough to learn it? Her one sister was pretty good at mana control and a promising mage, so maybe?

Meira began looking at the lessons again. Her sister was still free, and if she learned some useful things, she would be able to increase her value. Maybe even enough to be viewed as more than just someone to be married off. Skilled alchemists were valued nearly anywhere and by any faction, so that would be a good path. If she was talented in it.

Turning her gaze to the pages, she picked up one of the lessons she had picked before about finding the path suitable for yourself. If she had to pick for her sister, brother, or even herself... this had to be one of them, right? She was certain it would be good for anyone starting out on any new path to truly learn what they were good at.

The problem was... wouldn't the other lessons be based on what it was discovered a person was talented at?

She thought again and remembered she had to answer why it was interesting. Meira thought about it and decided to write her reasoning on a separate piece of paper. As she prepared to write, a wild thought entered her head... wouldn't it be interesting if her sister was talented enough to not just learn alchemy but even become a member of a faction? Maybe even the Order of the Malefic Viper?

That would mean she would not only be able to uplift herself but everyone else. If she was good enough, she could even buy or acquire their father, who had also been turned into a slave... maybe have some influence over the clan back home?

*Don't be stupid*, she reminded herself as she slapped her own chin a few times, enough to draw blood. She wiped it off quickly before she sighed and wrote down that it would

be interesting because it would allow someone to be more useful and have a better future. It was far more realistic her sister could become a valued servant or find work somewhere if she was a talented alchemist. Not by the Order of the Malefic Viper standards, but just for a small place like their village.

With this mindset, she tried to put together a proper list. She had been given three days, and she was certain it could not be this simple. Clearly, there was a deeper reason she had to realize, which was why she was given this much time.

--

Jake felt damn good finally having some alone time. No one bothered him for over a day as he just relaxed, ate toxic materials, chilled with books, and overall had a swell of a time. The mansion itself was filled to the brim with different things to explore, including some board games that reminded Jake of chess and even a damn television of sorts. A 3D television one could buy lessons for to enjoy on their own time.

Soon it was time to leave for his second lesson. The first one had been a very low-level one where it was entirely possible Jake had been the strongest one attending. He had no interest in going back for a second one either.

The lesson he was headed to would be on an entirely different level, and Jake was extremely interested in seeing how it would work out. Before he went, he decided to actually change things up to hide his identity in case he somehow met someone who knew of him.

He changed how his level displayed all the way down to 100 and shifted the color of his cloak to appear entirely dark green. He also took off his armor and put it in his spatial storage as he shifted to something more casual. Jake was pretty sure that most who attended could easily kill him if they wanted to anyway, no matter what gear he wore.

Changing his level to 100 may seem weird, but the reason he did so was apparent: it made it damn obvious it was changed. It led to some doubt that Jake could be far stronger, likely not even in D-grade, and coupled with his Bloodline and immunity to presences, he had great confidence in faking it.

The clothes he wore were ones he had found in the mansion. It was just a casual shirt and pants that he covered with his cloak. He even went as far as to change his boots. As for the mask, Jake thought a bit as he mentally tried to change it, and to his surprise, it responded. Jake could slightly warp how it looked and even change the color just with mental commands. Perhaps it was part of that Living Wood enchantment?

With everything ready, Jake stepped through the gate to his second lesson.

Instantly he felt the wind upon his face as his environment changed completely. Jake found himself standing not in a lecture hall but atop a large flattened mountain with shaped stone pavilions on pillars surrounding a large lowered center stage.

Jake saw different creatures already lounging on the different pavilions all around him. On one was a raging inferno that sometimes took on a humanoid form, on another a large wyvern, with others close by having even god damn dragons on them.

In fact, Jake felt like the majority of those in attendance were dragons, and looking about confirmed this feeling. Down on the center stage sat a single being in meditation too. It looked like an elf or a human except for the slightly twisted horns coming out of his forehead. There were no scales covering his body at all, which surprised Jake quite a bit.

Villy had scales at all times and did not look at all like this dragon in human form. Jake wondered why that was but decided to just write it up to gods probably being able to customize their form more. Or maybe it was that the humanoid form was just highly customizable to begin with?

When Jake appeared on his own pavilion, he got a few glances his way from surrounding platforms. A few dragons and wyverns, a human, and some other scalekin were among them. It was all a bit of probing as they saw someone who was seemingly a D-grade appear.

Jake just ignored them. He did feel a slight tinge of presence worm his way as one of the dragons got curious, and the moment it impacted him, Jake glanced the way of the dragon. He met its eyes as Jake just stared. A second passed before the dragon averted its gaze, with Jake doing the same.

Their exchange had been observed by others, and after it, all probing coming his way dispersed. It was like he had passed some weird test to be allowed to stay there. Not that Jake thought a normal D-grade could manage being surrounded by C, B, and A-grades all around. He had no idea how to actually determine the grades of others present, except he knew true dragons had to be at least B-grade.

Nothing more interesting happened before it was time for the lesson to begin. The dragon teacher sitting down on the platform opened his eyes as he slowly stood up.

"Welcome."

His voice echoed throughout the entire mountain as Jake felt the inherent power in it. Not a shadow of a doubt was in his mind that the A-grade below could erase him from existence with a mere thought. It was almost exciting.

"Creation and destruction. Fundamental forces and concepts we all inadvertently touch upon on our paths to power, even more so for any alchemist. The Alchemical Flame is a

fundamental force in itself, the basic version a marvel at the concept of destruction. It can destroy objects far too powerful for the user to otherwise break. Melt a slab of metal even one's own Dragonsbreath cannot leave a mark upon. It ignores anti-magical properties and can heat a dragon scale as easily as a piece of coal. However, contrary to what one would believe based on this, the Alchemical Flame is not only made to destroy but is also a catalyst of creation.

"The purpose of this lesson today is to improve not only the aspect of creation and destruction but the very nature and connection one has to their flame. The Alchemical Flame is something each of us has wielded on our path as alchemists. A loyal companion that has been at our sides since we began walking this path. Such prolonged use leads to familiarity and understanding at a level beyond regular comprehension."

Jake was listening as he followed along well in the first part. The second part was also something he understood, even if it clearly led with an assumption of having done alchemy for a long time.

"Like the breath of a dragon, this flame is an integral part of us. It is borne from the depths of one's soul. At first, this flame is merely another skill and a tool, but as with all other things, it changes the more one uses it. In many ways, the flame becomes an expression of your identity as an alchemist. Perhaps it may not look like that, but the influence is there.

"Willpower impacts the usage of all skills. Due to the malleable nature of the Alchemical Flame, the impact of Willpower is even greater; due to the conceptual nature of the Alchemical Flame, Willpower is more impactful. However, the unconscious effects of Willpower will result in changes to your flame outside of your own intention at times. Many attempt to alleviate this by increasing their level of control and focus during crafting sessions, but I would like to propose doing the exact opposite."

There was almost a shift on the mountaintop as if what the A-grade had just said was very revolutionary, or perhaps just went against what many presently did. Jake, of course, was mostly clueless about what the guy was on about, even if he did know Willpower impacted all kinds of magic and energy control.

"If your Alchemical Flame becomes so ingrained within you to synchronize directly with your will, a new path opens. I hold this lesson because I recently experienced enlightenment in my struggles to improve my flame. I did not believe it possible, but one day, while I worked with my flame, it appeared to almost oscillate in tandem with my will. It began moving without input as I felt it be controlled not by my mana but by my will alone.

"The level of control reached higher levels than ever before, and for a brief moment, I felt like I had grasped the cradle of creation and the vessel of destruction incarnate



within my palm. It faded as the flame ran out of mana, but the enlightenment remained. Allow me to demonstrate."

Instantly the entire center stage was bathed in deep red flames. It swayed in odd patterns as the dragon stood in the middle. He opened the palm of his hand as the flames gathered and took the form of a statue depicting a dragon.

"First comes creation," the teacher said as the flames parted and spread out, revealing the dragon statue. However, it was not made of flames but from what looked like marble.

"Entirely a production of the concept of creation born from the flame."

Jake stared as he felt confused... had the teacher just made something from nothing using the alchemical flame?

"This statue is as real as anything else, created only from Willpower and my Alchemical Flame. Of course, creation as a concept is nothing difficult with sufficient power. However, my method varies from such crude methods. Usually, the expenditure of such a task would be significant, but with the Alchemical Flame, I can tap into the system-created concepts embedded within to make use of the innate properties of creation embedded in the Alchemical Flame.

"The same is true for destruction."

The flame swept over his hand as the statue disappeared. It continued on behind him where it swept over a mountain range in the distance that likewise seemed to simply disappear the moment it made contact with the flame.

"Once more, it is all application of Willpower to amplify innate conceptual properties of destruction. However, as I said before, all of this was brought forth from achieving true resonance between your Willpower and your Alchemical Flame. This is where the importance of the Soulspace enters. Do note that the ability to access and actively influence your own Soulspace through conscious thought is a requirement for the following to be done. If you have not already reached the stage of condensing a Soulshape Avatar or something similar, that is something you should begin work on as soon as possible either way."

Jake felt like a few in the surroundings were disappointed, but Jake didn't really get it. He knew his Serene Soul Meditation was him entering his Soulspace, and he could enter it anyway if he wanted. Maybe giant lizards were just lazy with that kind of thing?

Then again, it was possible Jake had kind of cheated being able to enter his Soulshape. He had gone there during the Trial of Myriad Poisons, and he knew why. It was all the influence of Jake's Bloodline that seemed to effectively simplify things for



him to understand them better. That is why what back then was essentially a fight of Records was transformed into Jake fighting another version of himself.

The same concept applied with the sky of stars he had made to represent Shroud of the Primordial. The entire Soulspace was like a conceptual place where Jake's understanding was given a metaphorical form. So, surprisingly enough, he wasn't completely lost during the lesson so far.

"However, there is one more crucial step. As most of you have no doubt noticed, my Alchemical Flame is not pure. It is instead my Soulflame that I integrated long ago, created from an ember granted to me by an elder from my Dragonflight. But fret not, for even without a Soulflame, there are methods to mimic one, just be aware you will never achieve full oscillation before you get a Soulflame of your own. "

By now, Jake was really kicking himself for having not actually looked up what the hell a Soulflame was and how to get one. Newest update provided by **novel★fire★net**

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## Chapter 424: Mysterious Senior

Jake had so far wondered one thing during this lesson so far. How the hell was it worth 420,000 AC? Like, sure, it sounded like it was an interesting viewpoint and application of Willpower merged with the Alchemical Flame, but it didn't seem that special. It was basically just a trick most would probably figure out at some point themselves and definitely not worth paying that much for. It was also possible that those at higher grades just got a shitload of AC.

Luckily, after the first hour and the introduction was complete, his answer was given.

"To achieve this oscillation and resonance between your Willpower and Alchemical Flame, I have set up a number of methods and training exercises. It will primarily be done within the Soulspace and will depend on if you possess a Soulflame or not. The first parts can be done either way," the A-grade dragon said.

He waved his hand as crystals appeared on each pavilion at once. Jake inspected it for a moment as he walked over and held it in his hand after a brief scan.

"This information crystal will hold several exercises to be done as well as my own insights during the time of enlightenment, as well as even experimental reports of prior testing I have performed. There are certain magic scripts within I would highly

recommend looking into as well as a formation I would advise either making yourself or commissioning. The formation will allow you to practice controlling the flame without using mana but only Willpower. Most potent anti-mana formation will make do, but the one included in the crystal is specifically targeted towards mana control without limiting Perception-based detection skills.” Content originally comes from *novel✕fire✕net*

Finally, it was getting somewhere. Jake had not expected to be handed an information crystal, and from the looks of it, the thing was filled to the brim with insights, blueprints, and exercises. His brief scan did reveal it obviously required a very solid foundation, and Jake had a strong feeling practicing anything within would be a dead-end instantly for him simply due to how damn weak he was.

The practice in the real world, at least. Because a large part took place within the Soulspace where Jake had far more confidence in competing with near-anyone. Some of the scripts and magic circles were even to be placed within the Soulspace for practice and looked complicated as fuck, and as they existed within the Soulspace, Jake saw no way of getting help for those.

”As mentioned earlier, this state of harnessing your flame as an extension of your will is suited, if not made, for a Soulflame. Due to the Soulbound nature of a Soulflame, there are few other ways of establishing the metaphysical conceptual connection between your will and the flame regardless of all other circumstances. There are methods within the crystal to mimic a Soulflame, and while this may seem like a waste of time compared to simply just waiting till you acquire a Soulflame yourself, it is most definitely not.”

This seemed to instantly pique the interest of everyone once more, making it quite obvious many of them didn’t have a Soulflame yet. It also made Jake pay more attention as he, of course, didn’t have one either.

The dragon down on the platform smirked at the interest displayed by everyone.

”In fact, this may be the most valuable aspect of this lesson. Through practicing with my disciples and juniors, I learned that simply learning this method will result in a significantly improved ability to integrate a Soulflame as it touches on many of the same concepts as the integration process. I would go as far as to say it will almost double the chance compared to attempting it before fully comprehending my method.”

Now that got a response as a wave of disbelief and skepticism went through the mountain peak. Jake himself didn’t know if getting a Soulflame or whatever was hard to begin with, so he didn’t even react but just sat back and listened to why this was the case.

To paraphrase, it was down to similarities of methods and the fact that a Soulflame in itself was apparently very dependent and heavily impacted by Willpower, so if one

began learning this method, one kind of began learning to better control a Soulflame too.

The lesson continued as hours slowly passed, and the dragon teacher summoned magic circles and began displaying different examples of how one could create certain arrays to ease the initial process. He even spoke about certain flasks or potions one could brew to speed up the process and some poisons with what sounded like psychedelic properties. Those seemed to be a big hit in the Order when it came to comprehending high-level concepts.

Jake also quickly learned this knowledge had not come cheap. Well, it was cheap for the dragon but not his assistants, disciples, and even slaves. This is also where Jake learned that this entire technique and many of the formations and practices could also be dangerous and lead to adverse effects, perhaps even making the Alchemical Flame worse.

A Soulflame was also dangerous to integrate, it seemed. Like, the dragon said the chance of the Soulspace being burned down and the soul destroyed was far lower after learning his technique, and that sure sounded dangerous. Jake was seriously going to look up what a Soulflame was after this lesson.

The lesson slowly passed as Jake sat there and took it all in. Towards the end, he had to admit he failed to understand about ninety percent of what was said, and all the nitty-gritty stuff about formations, magic circles, and whatnot just flew over his head.

As the lesson was soon coming to an end, the dragon appeared to have one final demonstration in the pipeline.

"Now, to finish off this lesson, let me show you the fruit of my labor."

A flame appeared all around him as it hung in the air and spread out to surround the entire mountain. It covered an area of dozens of square kilometers as the dragon spoke again.

"A bit of mana to summon the flame," he said as the anti-magic array he had just erected before this final demonstration activated. "Now, usually with mana cut off, my connection would fade... but my flame has already transcended the need for such a feeble bond. However, do not think that means it is any less potent."

The flame began closing in on all the pavilions one by one. It began burning into the stone that formed the pavilions like it was nothing as the destructive flame turned the solid enchanted stone to nothing. On every single platform, the flame closed in on those sitting there as some reacted by making barriers or shrinking away from it, while others just frowned, clearly unsure what the hell the dragon was up to.

Everyone except for one.

Jake stood up as he curiously touched the deep red Alchemical Flame of the A-grade dragon. His hand sunk into it easily, and he felt like it was slightly warm to the touch, and it felt a bit weird. It wasn't solid, but he did feel like he touched... something. He waved his hand around a bit inside the flame before he pulled it out again, not a single mark upon his skin. Jake did not wear gloves currently, but based on how it didn't harm his sleeves, those would have been fine too.

He hadn't really been thinking as Jake became aware of the attention of everyone present now being focused squarely on him. Even the dragon teacher looked at Jake a bit curiously, with a hint of surprise also there. It was understandable why. The flame had been shown to destroy the powerful enchanted stone Jake knew he wouldn't even be able to leave a mark upon with his full power, yet Jake had touched it so nonchalantly, clearly aware it would do him no harm.

As for why Jake touched the flame... well, because he knew it wasn't harmful to him in the least. His danger sense was silent even as it closed in, and all his senses indicated it was harmless.

"Oh, you saw through my flame?" the teacher said, clearly asking Jake. Jake then felt Identify upon him and naturally blocked it, but not before leaking through a bit of his own aura and presence. The dragon reacted as he smiled and bowed slightly.

"May I know what senior thinks of my technique and how he saw through it?"

Jake was a bit surprised but didn't let it show. He did feel the pressure, though, as everyone now focused on him even more, and with the teacher showing such respect, it indicated Jake was stronger than him... did the dragon think Jake was a high-tier A-grade or an S-grade or something?

Put on the spot, Jake felt like he had to answer as he tried to actually act way smarter and more powerful than he was. Also... he had a feeling he was right, and even if he made himself look like an idiot, he could just leave and hopefully never see anyone present again ever in his life.

"No matter how much you control it, it is still an Alchemical Flame and bound by its fundamental concepts. Additionally, with only Willpower, it will naturally act according to your will, and your will was clearly not to harm anyone. Both consciously and unconsciously. The flame is destructive, yes, but only to objects without souls. Naturally, this includes items bound to an individual with a soul, such as equipment," Jake said, faking being as confident as he could.

"So simple deduction based on intent?" the dragon asked curiously. "The Soulflame I possess is one with inherent combat potential; would it not be risky to bet on an assumption? Not that I believe senior would have been harmed either way."

"There are no issues if my ability to deduct and detect intent are good enough," Jake answered back. "Additionally, this flame is only powered by Willpower. It isn't made for a fight but to destroy objects that put up no inherent resistance. It is a conceptual flame, didn't you say so yourself? So it can only act within the confines of its concept."

"What if my intent and will was to cause harm when the flame is conceptually able to damage living entities?" the dragon asked again. It didn't seem like a questioning, but more like the dragon was legitimately looking for input on how to improve his technique.

Jake had to be honest; he was a bit out of his depth by now. However, he did still have one answer. Something he himself felt was obvious.

"How can anyone believe a flame based solely on Willpower is meant to cause harm when not a shred of killing intent or bloodlust enters it? It is driven by your will, and as said before, that is both your conscious and unconscious will. A bit of killing intent would leak in, even if it is only the most minute trace."

The dragon seemed to frown a bit as he asked. "I feel uncertain such a level of killing intent would even be detectable. If I even purposefully willed for it to be hidden, it will be undetectable either way, will it not?"

"Not to my senses. And without any killing intent," Jake smirked as he touched it again, "this flame couldn't even harm a D-grade."

A few seconds passed as the dragon nodded and smiled as he chuckled a bit at what he no-doubt assumed was a joke. Hey, the best jokes were rooted in reality, right? The dragon finally bowed as he gracefully thanked Jake. "You have my gratitude for your insights; I shall take it up for consideration as I work on improving my technique."

He said those words and waited for Jake to nod in acknowledgment before the dragon continued.

"Let us return to the demonstration. I hope none of you had a fright as the flame of destruction closed in, but as shown by the senior, the flame was indeed harmless. However, this is only one of its aspects. For after destruction follows creation!"

The flames that had been mostly spread out during Jake and the dragon's conversation closed in again, and in a wondrous display, it touched upon the broken edges of the platforms as new stone seemed to grow out. It did not have the same color as the old pavilion, nor did it seem to retain the enchanted nature, but it was still actual stone that appeared out of nothing.

No... it appeared from the flame. A flame of creation.

"While it may look like the stone appears out of nothing, we all know it isn't so. The environmental mana alone is enough to construct this stone as it responds to my flame.

Once more, this does not consume my own mana, but the flame functions as a tool imposing my will upon the environment to amplify the concept of creation," the dragon said as he finished reconstructing all the platforms.

All of the red flame then just disappeared like it had never been there, and the dragon teacher dispelled the anti-magic formation he was standing in.

"Now for questions."

What followed was three hours of Jake just sitting there listening to questions he didn't understand with equally if not more complicated answers. Most were related to the formations and magical scripts, with a few being about complimentary alchemical creations.

Jake got none of it but felt too awkward to be the first one to leave. Clearly, those present had spent a lot and didn't want to waste even a second of it. He at least had this time to truly consider all those present.

There were only about two hundred present, far less than the prior lesson. Most also stayed in their beast forms or true forms without anyone batting an eye. Jake did not know if he should be surprised or not, but he did not detect a single Bloodline anywhere yet. Not in this lesson or anywhere in the Order so far. It appeared they were pretty rare, though Jake was certain he would meet some eventually.

When the lesson finally ended, and Jake was prepared to go, a figure suddenly teleported onto his platform. He didn't even need to look as he saw it was the teacher.

"I want to thank senior for attending this lesson of mine. Would it be of interest to exchange contact information? In that case, you can personally ask me if you encounter any points you want further elaborated," the A-grade dragon said.

Jake felt damn weird as it couldn't be more obvious the dragon thought Jake was some powerful hidden master who had graced the lesson with his presence.

By now, everyone else had already left, and it was just Jake and the dragon who remained. He considered for a while before Jake answered a bit truthfully. "I am not the ideal person to ask for advice from if that is what you are looking for, and I am certain you have a better use for your time than giving individual free counseling to strangers."

It was a polite rejection that the dragon accepted with grace. "I understand. May I at least know senior's name or title?"

He was put on the spot again as Jake considered making up some weird title or name on the spot. Maybe just a normal fake name? No, it would be weird to act like a super-powerful entity and then introduce himself as Bob.



In the end, he didn't quickly get on anything as he shook his head. "Who I am does not matter."

Jake opened his gate as he prepared to step through before saying one last thing. "Your lesson was very informative. Keep up the good work."

With those words, Jake stepped through the gate and appeared back in the mansion. Suddenly he felt exhausted as everything hit him, and he promptly went towards the bedroom where he flopped down on the bed, feeling exhausted from getting so much damn complex information jammed into his head in one day.

He had learned more complicated magic theory today than Jake had encountered on his entire path of alchemy so far.

And the worst part was...

He still didn't know what the fuck a Soulflame was.

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## Chapter 425: Soulflame & Exposed

Jake woke up in his new huge mansion bed after a well-deserved rest. He had taken a nap to rejuvenate himself and felt thankful that was still an option. Jake had learned some races didn't know how to sleep and never became able to, no matter if they gained human form or not. He was grateful that at least he would never lose his ability to, only the need for sleep. Sleeping was nice.

Sitting up in the bed, he saw he had slept only three or so hours. He stretched a bit before he got up and headed to the library to finally figure out what the hell a Soulflame was. He had already checked the Viper's drop of blood using Sagacity and found nothing, and the crystal he gained from the lesson didn't include a description either.

He would also leave Meira alone for her task, so he went to find the books himself. Not that he would necessarily have asked her either way. Jake was a big boy who could go to the library all by himself.

The library was huge and naturally came pre-stocked with books. All of them centered around D-grade alchemy and general knowledge. In the middle was a large tome that served as an index of sorts, and Jake went over and opened it. A projection of a list appeared, and with mental commands, Jake searched for the name Soulflame.



It returned a few thousand results, so Jake tried with something more precise.

He narrowed it down a few more times until he finally found a book just called: **Soulflames! Beware!**

It was a picture book. For children.

Perfection.

Jake quickly tracked it down as he took it out from the shelf, and it truly was a colorful picture book. It had a picture of a flame on the cover with two small, scaled children, staring at it. Jake couldn't wait as he opened it and began reading it. Well, reading was a strong word as it was light on text and heavy on colorful pictures.

He skimmed it for fun but quickly found it wasn't what he had hoped for. It was more a warning than a guide on Soulflames for children not to absorb any. So, by context clues, now Jake at least knew Soulflames were something you absorbed.,

Deciding to not mess around anymore, Jake went and actually found a real book on the subject. This one had the far more normal name: **Locating, Identifying & Understanding Soulflames For Beginners.**

Could he have just asked Villy? Sure, but he had an entire library to himself, so why not make use of it? The library also came with comfortable armchairs, so Jake found one and took a seat as he started reading.

So... Soulflames.

Soulflames were not some skill rank or something you "made"; instead, it was something you found. Soulflames were a special kind of natural treasure found throughout the multiverse, but they were scarce and often quite dangerous and incredibly difficult to find due to appearing in dangerous places.

A Soulflame formed when an environment reached a certain threshold, and an elemental was about to be born and awaken spirituality, but somehow it failed and turned into a Soulflame instead. It was just not truly a living object, but somehow it managed to retain a fragment of a Truesoul from what Jake gathered, making it a potent item.

This meant a Soulflame did have partial properties of living beings. It did not have levels, but it could grow independent of anyone or anything else. It was not in the same vein that other items grew either. Items just grew with time and absorbed atmospheric mana while being compatible for upgrades, but a Soulflame needed to "learn" and upgrade itself. Because while a Soulflame did not live, it did have instincts that landed somewhere between a natural treasure with innate defensive abilities and a truly living thing.

These rare flames were incredibly valuable due to their special natures and something most alchemists desired, but it wasn't as simple as finding one. Firstly, Soulflames had rarities, and while they could be upgraded, it was difficult. The only way to upgrade a Soulflame was to have it absorb similar Soulflames in order to "learn" from them, as mentioned earlier.

So even if one got a common rarity Soulflame, it wasn't necessarily good. In fact, Soulflames below rare were often not viewed as anything worth ever absorbing. These flames should instead be used as fuel for other Soulflames.

Then there was the issue of also needing a compatible Soulflame. Soulflames came in all shapes, sizes, affinities, and with innate concepts. Jake would not be able to absorb a Soulflame of pure light magic, and while he could absorb a Soulflame of the water affinity, it would probably "nerf" him and his current Alchemical Flame as he would get a flame he wasn't good at using and didn't truly fit him.

Alchemists had found ways of absorbing these Soulflames and making them a part of themselves by integrating them into their Truesouls, like they were Soulbound items. This process also integrated the Soulflame with their Alchemical Flame and effectively permanently merged the two. Big focus on the word permanently because once a Soulflame and an Alchemical Flame were merged, it was viewed as permanent. The book did mention methods of undoing it and unbinding a Soulflame existed but also emphasized it would come with severe consequences.

So you shouldn't just merge with a Soulflame haphazardly. If Jake merged with a common rarity one now, it would downgrade the rarity of his Alchemical Flame to common, and based on the nature of the Soulflame, potentially make his Alchemical Flame skill useless for what Jake currently used it for.

This did mean many alchemists never got a Soulflame. Soulflames weren't necessary, even if they were good to have, and an alchemist with a Soulflame and one without at a similar rarity and level would be unequal. However, it was far easier just to upgrade your own Alchemical Flame to higher rarities and far easier to have one suited to you if you never absorbed a Soulflame.

To put it simply, a Soulflame was absorbing a natural treasure that merged with Alchemical Flame, adding another layer of difficulty to the upgrade process while "locking in" the nature of the flame semi-permanently. This did result in a better flame – assuming you got one suited to you, that is.

However, he did discover one thing... getting an Arcane Soulflame was not going to happen. Transmuting one was not possible due to their state as semi-living entities. Giving birth to one, while theoretically possible, would likely take Jake thousands of years and way more resources than it was worth. And that was from an optimistic viewpoint.

So, anyway. Now that Jake had an idea what a Soulflame was, the next question was obvious.

How did he get one? And should he even get one?

To the surprise of absolutely no one, the easiest way to obtain a Soulflame was to just buy one. Alchemists had devised methods of trapping Soulflames and sealing them for later sale, but even that process was difficult.

As the Soulflame had innate spirituality, it would struggle. It would try to destroy whatever sealed it, and often its power was not to be underestimated. Jake even read many examples of people dying to Soulflames that they tried to capture. The only thing more dangerous than capturing a Soulflame was to try and merge with it.

When the dragon teacher had mentioned the risk of scorching one's Soulspace, it was not a joke or an exaggeration. It was a common occurrence that people who had spent obscene amounts of money on a Soulflame would find themselves killed or crippled in the process of absorbing them. The book Jake had found did not touch on any absorption methods but did warn one against attempting without a solid plan.

The question of if he should get one was also tricky and one he couldn't truly answer. It was the kind of thing Jake would only know if he ever came across one, and when that happened... well, he would follow his intuition.

Albaromoz Emberflight returned from holding his first lesson in quite a while as he instantly took out a token and sent a message towards an Elder of the Dragonflight. The information he included resulted in an instantaneous answer as he was granted an audience immediately. However, not with the one he expected...

He headed to the teleportation hub as he went towards the territory of the local Emberflight Clan. The Emberflight Clan was a Dragonflight consistent of thousands of branches spread throughout the multiverse in many different sectors and planets. They had naturally also chosen to have a presence on Primordial-4 due to the vicinity of the Order of the Malefic Viper. Also, the fact it was a Great Planet just made it a natural space to set up a branch.

The Emberflight Clan was a Dragonflight that specialized in the concept of fire but also alchemy. The Order was a great place to send their young and for them to learn methods not taught anywhere else. In fact, the Dragonflight currently had well-over ten thousand of their young geniuses attending, and many higher-leveled beings like himself also make use of the Order.

Albaromoz teleported a few more times before he went towards the Firebound Peak, home of the local branch leader. It was a Grand Elder of the Emberflight Clan that had stepped into the realms of divinity dozens of Eras ago.

Flying towards the mountain, he felt the pressure from the flames that burned at the top. It pierced the sky like a pillar of the world, extending an impossible distance. The heat emanating from the Peak halfway up would be enough to kill a C-grade, and the chamber of the Grand Elder was something Albaromoz as an A-grade couldn't handle easily.

When he reached the Peak, he found himself before a giant golden gate leading into it. He kneeled before it as it swung open, inviting him in. This was only his second time there, with the first time being when he had been granted his Soulflame by the Grand Elder herself. It was a Soulflame nurtured by their clan only granted to elites, and Albaromoz had gained his shortly after reaching A-grade.

Through the golden gate, he entered a massive hall of gold with countless precious treasures scattered throughout. A single pillar of the hall would rival the wealth of most A-grades, and the treasures scattered haphazardly would be able to create wars in even A-grade empires.

It was truly a wonderous Dragon Cave, far better than Albaromoz's own.

"Child of Emberflight," a voice echoed as Albaromoz felt the pressure, and he instantly kneeled. A being appeared before him as he purposefully bowed even deeper.

"Patron Fireplume," Albaromoz spoke in reverence. Yes, the Grand Elder was not only his benefactor and leader of the local branch but also his Patron. He looked up and saw the horned woman, wearing a deep red dress that looked to be burning as she stood in the middle of the hall and regarded him.

"This knowledge you bring is not to be taken lightly... are you certain?" her ethereal voice echoed throughout the hall. Albaromoz felt the barriers fully up as their conversation was fully sealed from the outside world.

"I would not deign to use the word certain, but I do hold enough confidence to request an audience just on the chance I am correct. The ambient mana surrounding him was fresh, not from here. His knowledge seemed surface-level at best, even if he had deep insights into certain elements. Additionally, he somehow possessed enough Academy Credits to attend my lesson, which means he must have a backer within the Order. He was the last one to sign up for the lesson, too, despite it being available for two years... and he signed up the day the new batch from the ninety-third universe finished the entry-dungeon. He had the blessing of the Malefic One and was able to hide from my Identify effortlessly. What he did feed me was purposeful... and I felt a presence that should not belong to one such as him," Albaromoz explained.

"Elaborate."

"The presence was... and pardon my disrespect, more powerful than Patron Fireplume's, at least it felt as such. Yet he was no god as he possessed a blessing. Coupled with my belief, he is one of the newcomers from the new universe..."

Albaromoz had confidence in his theory. In fact, he was certain enough that he would bet his life on it.

His Patron naturally understood as she also answered in a serious voice. One that meant she also understood the gravity of the discovery.

A young human, likely only D-grade at best, able to hide his identity and remain unperturbed beneath the presence of an A-grade. One who could leak a presence more powerful than a god while also holding a blessing from one, meaning he wasn't a god himself. One with deep insights into certain elements of something while only having surface-level elsewhere. Newly integrated... the conclusion was obvious to Albaromoz and his Patron.

"It's a Bloodline Patriarch."

The conclusion was obvious. A transcendence was also theoretically possible, but passive transcendences were beyond rare. No, a Bloodline made far more sense.

Bloodlines appearing far more in new universes was a well-known fact. It was like the system had "stored up" Bloodlines until the generation that would be integrated happened. They were also always Bloodline Patriarchs with entirely new Bloodlines as they came from a new universe. This was a golden opportunity, and Albaromoz knew it.

"However, he is already a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper," Patron Fireplume said. "Moreover, you failed to get his contact information. This is, of course, assuming you are correct. Something I have no way of discovering as he is hidden within the Order." The latest\_ept\_sodes are on\_the **novel•fire•net**

"With permission, may I direct the young mistress to evaluate him during a lesson? If my theory is correct, he is bound to attend some of the introductory lessons, and including her as one of the scouts would allow us to see if he does indeed possess a Bloodline," Albaromoz inquired.

The young mistress was a young talent of the clan who came from a prestigious line from the main clan headquarters. She also possessed the Bloodline of the main clan, making her an ideal candidate as those with Bloodlines could feel one another.

Patron Fireplume appeared in thought for a moment before she agreed. "Very well, but keep me updated at every step. If it is truly as you say, he may have a pinnacle-level Bloodline. And whatever happens, do not cause issues within the Order or overstep any boundaries."

That was a given, Albaromoz thought. He didn't have a death wish.

"Less than a week," Vilastromoz smiled in triumph.

"For it to be discovered he has a Bloodline... not that he is your Chosen," Duskleaf protested.

"See, the key is in the details. We made a bet how long it would take till his secrets were discovered by a public faction, and I said less than a week, and you said more than a week. By all metrics, I win," the Viper insisted.

"Fine, you win, congratulations, you are the best and most correct ever," Duskleaf said sarcastically. "Are you gonna do anything about it?"

"Why would I? Isn't this just gonna make things more fun?" the Malefic Viper said with a big grin.

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## Chapter 426: A New Path

Jake spent the next few hours researching Soulflames a bit more but eventually put it on hold and shelved the entire topic. Choosing a Soulflame was something he didn't doubt he would eventually do, but he wanted to get a bit further on his path first. In fact, getting a Soulflame as a D-grade was generally viewed as a bad idea, and Jake had to learn how to make certain personalized arrays first anyway.

Due to that, Jake returned to studying neurotoxins. He also began actually selecting some lessons to attend in a week or so when the introductory lessons began. From a talk with Reika, he learned that another batch of new students had just arrived that day, and apparently, even more were coming. Not from the ninety-third universe, but just from across the multiverse. It seemed like the Order was really recruiting!

At least he thought so until he discovered this was just a normal occurrence every year. The real recruitment periods were far rarer and often had millions of new entries, while a few hundred every day were just the stragglers and transfers.

The reason it was like this was that – lo and behold – people talented in alchemy weren't born according to the recruitment schedule of the Order. Due to that, it technically recruited all year round, but with just far fewer entering every day. Lessons for newer students were thus only held once a month or so when a good batch had



arrived as teachers didn't wanna waste their time holding lessons for a few dozen students only.

So far, Jake had picked a few lessons that he wanted to attend. They were widely spread out and covered a plethora of topics, as he had taken to heart the words of the scalekin projection during the dungeon. He had a shallow base, and he wanted to solidify it by getting a good grasp of many different topics.

With Sagacity, he could more easily pick up and learn skills he didn't have the specific skill for as well. Jake still had no idea how to make some common alchemy products such as flasks and pills. Both of those were also mainstays, and Jake learned from Reika she already knew how to make pills. In fact, when it came to beneficiary products, she specialized in pills. So it looked like they would attend a few pill-making lessons together as Reika had gotten slammed during her own dungeon that her methodology was flawed, and she needed to pick up more traditional methods to shore up her weaknesses.

He did, however, notice one problem Reika also pointed out. The Second World Congress was coming up relatively soon, and he wondered how exactly that would work. Would he have to go back to Earth to attend, or would he get an invitation while in the Order? If he could enter while in the Order, where would he go, and didn't he need to select people to enter with like last time? Many questions, so little time.

Questions he would ignore until they came relevant. He did as always and kept things simple. Even if he did not attend the Second World Congress, Jake honestly didn't care much. He would go if he could as he was sure some important votes would prop up, but if it turned out to be annoyingly difficult to attend, he could just have Miranda handle it.

On the third day since he did his lesson with the dragon, a certain elf appeared. Almost on the dot, when three days had passed since she was given her task, Meira stood nervously outside the bedroom Jake had used to read in. What? Huge beds were great for reading.

She looked nervous as she stood with a small pile of papers. Meira kept looking down at them and even looked like she was on the edge of just leaving again.

Jake wasn't giving her the chance to.

"Come in," he said as he jumped off the bed and, with a string of mana, made the double-door swing open. She nervously stood outside and nearly jumped when he did so, clearly not aware Jake knew she was there despite Jake having shown to always know several times prior.

She quickly reacted as she bowed and presented the papers before her. "I have chosen five just as ordered!"



Jake didn't move to take the papers but just stood there as he asked. "And why did you pick those five?"

He was already partly prepared to send her away again, but she unexpectedly had a good answer. "Because I believe they can change someone's Path."

Raising an eyebrow, Jake motioned for her to elaborate.

"The lessons of the Order will allow even a novice to step into the realm of alchemy. Even if it is impossible to become a master or even remotely skilled in only five lessons, it can help build a foundation and set a path for later development and even give access to more potent classes and professions," Meira answered.

Jake nodded along with her words. However, he was not satisfied and threw her a look. He saw her grit her teeth a bit as she looked more nervous than before. Like she really didn't want to say what she was about to.

"If one does prove skilled... it can allow someone to find good employment and a safe future..." she began.

Jake was about to protest as she continued.

"Or, if really skilled, perhaps even join the Order or forge their own path."

Now, this is where Jake had to be perfectly honest about one thing... he was never sure what he actually wanted Meira to do or decide. He had no profound realization or divine epiphany in mind he wanted to subtly guide her towards. He just wanted her to, for once in her life, fucking dream a little and use her imagination.

He was already plenty satisfied as he nodded. "Leave the five lessons here, and I shall look them over. I will call for you if there is anything."

Meira looked reluctant but did as told and left the papers. Jake closed his eyes as she left to think as he subtly picked up a small voice she no-doubt thought he wouldn't hear.

"Maybe even a better life..."

Jake grinned when he heard it. It wasn't his fault she thought she could hide from a ten-thousand Perception D-grade.

As for the papers themselves, only one of the previous ones remained. It was the one about finding out what you were good at. It was the one Jake fully agreed with the first time around. The others were a bit different from what Jake had thought:

## **Metaphysiology For Beginners**

A lesson about comprehending Soulshapes of other living beings and understanding how energy traveled in their body. It was a lesson Jake himself had looked at but ultimately filtered out for now as he frankly didn't need it. He could learn such things through infecting foes with poison and track it. Also, it was the kind of thing Jake knew he was way better at learning during live combat than in a boring classroom.

As for why Meira wanted it? Jake had some clues, but he wasn't going to ask. Considering it was a bit of an odd choice, Jake was certain it was made with consideration.

### **Internal & Touch-Based Mana Control I**

Now, this one made more sense as, from what Jake had gathered, Meira was entirely self-taught. Well, so was Jake, but Jake was Jake, and he had learned it was a bad idea to use himself as a basis of what one could expect after he had assumed Neil and the others to be utter morons for not being able to freely manipulate mana as mid-tier E-grades. That it was touch-based also showed it was chosen with more consideration than just "mana control good." So yeah, a well-chosen lesson.

### **Novice Potioneering** This chapter is updated by *novel•fire•net*

Jake honestly had no comments on this one... it just touched on how to make potions for absolute beginners, and the only real thing of note was how it seemed to almost target servants and mass producers.

The final lesson was the most interesting, and he truly meant interesting.

### **Tempering Your Mental State: The Basics of A Stable Mind**

There were a lot of lessons Jake had expected her to maybe select. He had assumed she would pick some he would very much disagree with, maybe one about how a servant could make their master like them more or how to be a better test subject.

What Jake had not expected was for Meira to select a lesson all about dealing with Jake's shit.

In more seriousness, it was a lesson to temper one's mental state. Jake read it over and had to admit it was probably a good idea, especially for someone like Meira. It was all about keeping a cool head and not losing one's head in a stressful situation or during a crafting session. For Meira, it would allow her to hopefully become able to also improve her mindset. Jake didn't know if she recognized this or if she seriously did just want to be able to not constantly be nervous around him. This is, of course, assuming she knew these lessons were for her.

When Jake was done looking at them all, he felt oddly satisfied. He felt like he had gotten through to Meira at least partially, and she had actually put thought into her

selections. There were no lessons related to poison whatsoever, and only one that was even directly linked to alchemy.

He would wait a while before calling Meira again, but he was ready to “approve” them. He just wanted to make sure she knew the lessons were for her. Based on the selections, it could be anyone. It was entirely possible her interpretation had been to pick lessons a servant or a slave could take, but her final words as she left made him doubt that. Even if it was made for those... well, they fit Meira too.

Jake returned to his books as he called back Meira the next day for a follow-up. She appeared even more nervous than the first time proving she really did need that final lesson. Not that Jake had anything against her being an open book. In fact, he preferred it.

“Who do you think these lessons are suited for?” Jake asked her first thing.

“A novice of alchemy and someone generally lacking in insight and knowledge already possessed by most,” Meira answered honestly.

“And what kind of people would that be?”

“Workers, servants, slaves, or merely those from a weak world or perhaps a suppressed faction,” she answered promptly again. He wasn’t sure if she had predicted this line of questioning, but she sure felt ready.

Jake looked up at her as he asked again, more directly. “Do you think I made you select these lessons for anyone in particular?”

He really wanted her to answer herself. It would indicate she at least believed it a possibility. Jake hoped he had made it obvious by now it was for her.

“These lessons would be ideal if there are followers back in the ninety-third universe or others who serv-“

Jake looked at her with a raised eyebrow, his mask naturally invisible as he made it every time they spoke.

His raised eyebrow was enough to make her stop talking. She looked even more nervous than before. Jake could almost see the internal battle as she considered if she should truly speak. Meira finally clenched her fists as she asked in a meek voice:

“Me?”

Jake just grinned as the first step of operation: “get rid of elf slave,” was completed.

Miranda felt the air change as the ominous verdant light lit up the hidden cave.

A pentagram around a hundred meters across lit up the neatly decorated cave. In the corners of the pentagram were five altars, all giving off intense energy as they pulsed with power and burned with verdant light. It was a ritual circle of immense power, and standing within it, Miranda felt her own power swell. That is in addition to the passive effects it already had.

These altars were naturally the Yalsten Altars given by Jake.

***[Yalsten Altar of the Damned (Ancient)] – An altar created by an extremely skilled crafter from the long-perished world of Yalsten, using a single unbroken piece of an unknown metal. The metal of the altar itself makes it near-indestructible for any being below A-grade. This altar has absorbed vast amounts of blood to empower it further, as countless sacrifices have been made upon it. It has been enchanted further to increase the effectiveness of all rituals made using it as a catalyst. The effect of all sacrificial rituals increased further. Faint Records and echoes of old rituals remain imprinted upon the altar, making it passively infuse anyone lying upon it with the life energy of those once sacrificed upon it.***

***Requirements: N/A***

On top of each altar laid eggs Miranda had gone far to acquire. They were not meant to ever give birth to anything but were simply vessels of pure vital energy. They looked more like obsidian stones than anything else and were currently just greedily absorbing the passive life energy given off by the altars.

The pentagram was done now, but that was only the first part as Miranda began working on the exterior walls with srips and whatnot while also smoothening them out to more easily write on them. In fact, this was the kind of ritual circle Miranda would have to constantly fortify and improve as time passed.

Not that she complained... she had worked on it since the Auction ended and had so far gained seven levels just setting it up and working on it alone. She had already made a circle like this before, but the difference between the old and her new one was the difference between heaven and earth. Miranda was aware that while within the circle and her own domain that was Haven, she was near-unbeatable.

Miranda didn't know if it was some kind of self-induced Stockholm syndrome, but she had truly begun to enjoy being a witch.

She sat down in meditation as above ground, a projection of her body appeared in the office. Miranda felt her senses be transferred, but she only managed to touch a few papers on the table before one of them accidentally cut her and the projection dispersed.

"Could have gone better," she chuckled as she decided to just return to fortifying the circle. As a Verdant Witch, she was not a traditional mage of any kind. She was not the

kind of mana-user who would be flinging spells at an enemy while teleporting around and throwing up barriers to protect herself. Instead, she was the kind to sit in a ritual circle on the other side of the planet as her spells manifested through mediums that could project her magic and kill foes before they even knew what happened.

Of course, such things were still too early for her, but Miranda had already embraced that path by now. She had genuinely not expected it, but she wasn't half-bad at being a witch, which probably wouldn't have come as a surprise to her first boyfriend, who called her just that the last time they met.

As she thought that, Lillian pinged her on a pager of sorts given by Arnold that the hawks had returned from the Undergrowth dungeon. Miranda was a bit worried as she remembered that place. They had only cleared it due to Sultan being present, even if Felicia and Roman also helped out tremendously.

In the final part, they had been made to fight some mechanical wolf by a projection too, which was honestly an odd experience. The projection had been a bit rude and short with them too, but that didn't mean that damn wolf had been any less dangerous.

She feared that the hawks would have met trouble, but it appeared not, as Lillian's message was short and concise, except for one small thing.

"Did she just say Sylphie was wearing a medal?"

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

## Chapter 427: Windy Times Ahead

Blue crackly bolts chased Sylphie, but she zoomed too fast for the evil Metal Man to catch up to her. She couldn't out-zoom the bad laser, but Sylphie was super fast and super good at dodging those. Not that Sylphie was happy as Metal Man was the evilest Metal Man Sylphie had ever met!

Sylphie was happy mom and dad were at least not there, so evil Metal Man couldn't bully them too. Not that Sylphie also didn't bully back. It was just boring bullying. Metal Man didn't care about Sylphies whooshes at all but just kept running. Sylphie did see the weird shiny skin on Metal Man react, and the wind told Sylphie metal man did get hurt, so she just kept going.

She would make the large box slowly be filled with her own whooshy winds and slowly cut the evil Metal Man until his shiny skin stopped being shiny! It was just boring. But

Sylphie knew getting impatient could get her hurt. She had learned that, so she kept being super careful and stayed away from the evil man.

After about fifteen minutes of slicing the Metal Man, he probably thought Sylphie was getting tired, but Sylphie had a super trick. She flew away as she used her gift from Uncle and activated what people called a "vest" and took out a small bottle from the big hidden pocket within.

Metal Man thought Sylphie would run out of wind power juice? Metal Man was wrong as Sylphie had a wind power juice bottle from Uncle that she quickly drank to continue!

She had to be super careful because Metal Man sometimes got in close and used many Metal Man tricks to try and catch her. At one time, Sylphie even had her wing whooshed off! It was super dangerous, but Sylphie was sure she would never get caught.

Sylphie was wrong.

Metal Man's legs suddenly seemed to disappear as he mega-zoomed towards her just as Sylphie was turning. She tried to get away, but a net of crackly lightning bound her as Sylphie was grabbed. Dad had warned her a lot about this happening... how if she was ever caught, she would be in trouble.

Sylphie never got why, though?

She turned windy and flew away as Metal Man couldn't hold onto her because holding onto wind was, like, super hard. She even managed to give him a good slap with her wing as she flew off! Metal Man kept chasing her after that, and it ended up taking a loooong time before finally Metal Man just stopped moving and stood still.

Sylphie tried to attack, but the Metal Man was still super tough. She tried to charge up a big attack, but suddenly Metal Man disappeared. Sylphie was confused and flew around for a bit before the big cube in the middle lit up and began blinking. Sylphie didn't trust it and flew away.

"Use the teleporter on top of the monument."

The stupid glowy dungeon man even tried to bait her into a trap!

"It is not a trap... the dungeon is over, but you need to go through for your final evaluation."

Sylphie was taken aback... it could even read her mind!? Sylphie knew she couldn't trust Glowpy Man, who had made her fight Metal Man. They were clearly in it together. She kept circling the area, not trusting the bad cube. Until she got bored, that is, and decided to face the trap head-on!

She landed on the teleporter and was ready as she sent out wind blades everywhere when she appeared and even made a whirlwind to hide. Sylphie was super strong and tore apart the room filled with blinky things and weird metal stuff.

"There is no need for that!" Glowy Man yelled. Sylphie was still suspicious, but the wind was silent, and it didn't seem dangerous, so she triumphantly dispelled her super wind magic and stared at the Glowy Man, who had finally admitted defeat.

"Finally... Okay, now for your evaluation... I... I'm gonna be honest... I am a bit unsure where to rate you. On the one hand, your survival skills and speed make you near-impossible to kill, but your damage outside of certain instantaneous strikes are downright horrendous."

"REE!" Sylphie screamed as Glowy Man was being super rude. She knew it was a trap! It was those things Uncle called mental attacks, wasn't it?

"Alright! But, I simply cannot figure out what you are. Are you a beast or an elemental? Readings are inconclusive."

Once more, Glowy Man asked weird stuff. Sylphie was Sylphie.

"The tangible form displayed most of the time indicates beast, but the intangible wind transformation was not a skill or anything, but simply a natural change of form..."

Sylphie looked around the room curiously as Glowy Man was being weird.

"Moreover, while the magic displayed did belong predominately to the wind-affinity, it is not merely that. Measurement devices detect high-level concepts this dungeon is simply not designed to measure. The readings also indicate you are not even a year old, yet the magic contains traces of ancientness, which are contradictory. Perhaps it is-"

Sylphie began pecking some of the metal duds around the room as Glowy Man kept being weird and talking to himself. Uncle sometimes talked to himself, but not this much. Sylphie was getting pretty bored as there wasn't anything interesting in the room. At least nothing she could get to.

Finally, the Glowy Man stopped doing that weird stuff.

"Anyway, I will conclude this falls within the realm of the trial being inconclusive. You did not manage to defeat the Census Golem but only had it retreat as it ran out of power. Yet I cannot tell who the ultimate winner would be. Now, giving beasts rewards in a dungeon is a bit more complicated than with the enlightened, but we of the Altmar Empire do have means."

And that is how Sylphie got some tasty snacks and a cool medal with a weird squiggly thing on it.



Four more days had passed since Jake successfully made Meira realize she was gonna begin to take lessons, and she had just returned from her first one. It was the one about finding your own path, and she certainly looked deep in thought afterward. She had still gone to report to Jake, but he had just told her to go to her residence and reflect on the lesson instead.

Jake learned that Meira had her own token already, too, though it was quite a bit different from Jake's. He learned it was a "subordinate token" of sorts and was bound to his own. The reason for this was obvious as it would allow a master to send out their slaves or servants to buy things or even book lessons for them. To Jake, it meant he could have Meira handle stuff herself, though he did have to give permissions for her to sign up for any lessons or even make purchases. Luckily he could program the token to just approve any lesson bookings by itself.

Naturally, the token also allowed her to use all the teleportation gates scattered throughout the entire Order, and he also gave her all-access to those. So even if Meira wanted to consult him on things, he could avoid her as she could do everything by herself already.

Jake also had the excuse that his own first "real" lesson was beginning. It was a simple one merely called **EssentialConcocting Methods & Tricks: Aimed At New Members of the Order**. This chapter is updated by *novel✕fire✕net*

The name was a bit shameless and quite honestly genius marketing on the teacher's part. Jake also quickly learned this lesson restarted once a month while taking twenty-five days in total. Each lesson was only two hours too, so it usually fit well around other lessons. From the looks of it, it was also a constant thing that repeated every single month with no real breaks. The teacher was a C-grade scalekin, and the evaluation of the lesson was overwhelmingly positive. To put it simply, it was a must-have for most new attendants of the Order, and even Reika would participate. It was also mega-cheap at only 3 AC, but Jake reckoned the teacher made up for it by sheer volume through cornering the market.

When the time to leave came, Jake activated the token and stepped through the gate as the two prior times. He instantly took in the sight of the massive hall that was even larger than the one about combat cauldrons. Sure, it didn't match a freaking mountain top in sheer size, but it was still massive.

However, that was not the most noteworthy thing. The instant he appeared he sensed a presence in the room that was oddly familiar. He instantly whipped his head around as he stared across the hall, seeing a woman standing with a red orb of sorts in hand. She stared down at it and, a second later, looked up as she made eye contact with Jake.

Jake used Identify as he felt one also impact himself, naturally showing his level at 183 – that's right, he had faked a level-up.

However, even so... the woman was powerful and had an unexpected race.

### **[Dragonkin – lvl 199]**

Jake felt a bit confused as she did not at all look like a Dragonkin. She looked far more like an elf, pointy ears and all, with nothing indicating for her to be a Dragonkin besides the two small curved horns on her head, not unlike the A-grade dragon in human form.

She was clearly D-grade, though. Peak D-grade and Jake's initial estimation when looking at her were not in his favor if it came down to a fight. It was even worse than the damn Hydra by a fair deal.

The two of them stared at each other across the room as Jake's beastly eyes met the deep orange ones of the dragonkin. She smiled and nodded as Jake mimicked her nod of recognition.

It was not often you met others with Bloodlines. In fact, it was his first time since coming to the Order, not counting Villy, of course.

Neither of them made any moves to further communicate, but he did see her take out some kind of token as she went to take a seat. Jake did notice that a lot of people seemed to have taken an interest in her as she was practically swarmed, and it was only her relatively unapproachable aura that kept them at bay.

Looking about, he also spotted Draskil, who was having an even worse situation as he was utterly surrounded by a disproportionately female fanbase. Nearly as disproportionate as the male fanbase following the female dragonkin. Jake recognized grifters when he saw them, and it was almost comforting to know sycophants were a multiversal phenomenon.

Jake was also approached by a few people, but he didn't really engage as he found somewhere and took a seat. He found himself sitting between two young men, one of them a scalekin and the other an elf, both barely level 100. Both of them nodded in recognition at him. He had the fake Lesser blessing, so even if he wasn't a true standout, he still stood out a little bit.

There were quite a lot of blessings scattered throughout. Villy had really gone all-out in the way of blessing his followers, especially in the younger generation. Most were naturally minor blessings which Jake remembered Villy once mentioned he could give out like free samples at a supermarket. Yes, that exact metaphor.

A good amount of lesser ones were also present, a single Major blessing and then Jake's new good friend Draskil and his Divine Blessing, putting the majority of the spotlight on him. This meant Jake could relatively fade into the background. Well, besides the mysterious woman with the Bloodline, but it didn't look like anyone had noticed her and Jake's brief exchange.

This allowed him to just sit down and relax as the lesson began a minute or so later. Everyone shut up when a scalekin appeared down on stage. He had muted yellow scales, and Jake clearly felt the aura of a C-grade.

“Welcome to my first lesson where I will teach you essential methods and tricks to concocting. After years of researching and recognizing common mistakes and oversights by new members of the Order, this lesson has been put together and then further refined and improved over centuries. I am certain many of you will hear much you already know and perhaps find elementary. However, each of us comes from different backgrounds and paths, and what is standard to you might be novel to another. Just know there is no shame in ignorance, as long as you actively strive to eliminate it and improve yourself,” the scalekin said in an oddly soothing tone as he reminded Jake of a kind grandfather more than some powerful C-grade.

The words also set a precedent and a mood as he began explaining concocting in incredibly simple terms. He talked about the importance of mana control and practicing mana control even outside of alchemy and mentioned how many could buy puzzles and other training tools. He advised people to learn telekinesis if they hadn’t already, just by using mana to control objects.

He mentioned the importance of knowing your cauldron. How one had to eliminate unwanted properties in poison before using it, and how some remnants could stay in the cauldron if you failed to clean it adequately afterward. All of this was still incredibly basic to Jake, but he didn’t look down on anyone. As the teacher had said, being ignorant was just a temporary state of being if one was willing to learn.

There were some interesting comments on concocting in there, especially when it came to merging poison, and Jake even had a few times where he recognized he had made minor mistakes in the past. Like how he often didn’t properly consider the order of items added to a concoction properly, or how he missed out on some synergistic effects that were easily achieved.

As Jake was still deeply engrossed, the lesson was suddenly over.

“Thank you all for attending the first lesson. Today we only covered the most basic things, so if you feel disappointed currently, let us hope tomorrow will bring something enlightening. I sincerely wish to see you all again, and thank you for attending.”

The scalekin bowed, and without thinking much, Jake mimicked those around him as he also got up and bowed in return. Not that he needed to think. He had gone to university for five years, gone to dozens of seminars, and even attended two other lessons in the Order... but this one had been the first Jake had lost track of time during.

Not a doubt in his mind existed that the teacher on the stage below had skills related to teaching and speaking, coupled with an incredible natural talent. It was not at all a surprise why this lesson was so highly rated, even if it seemed so mundane.

People eventually began leaving, and Jake planned on too but felt a presence approach. He looked over and saw the female dragonkin make her way towards him, and Jake instantly cursed inside.

*Please don't...*

She didn't stop but went straight for where Jake was as those around him gladly made a path.

*Well...*

The dragonkin stopped before him as she bowed slightly and asked: "Excuse me, do you have a moment?"

*Fuck...*

Jake felt the gazes of hundreds of men upon him, hatred burning in their eyes. He tried to ignore them as he asked, hoping this would be quick. "I do, but I am not certain what for?"

He should at least be polite, right? It would be rude to just reject her, and he was a bit curious what her Bloodline was all about as he guessed it had to be about that. However, his answer earned him the ire of the fan group behind the dragonkin, something she somehow masterfully ignored. Her answer definitely didn't help either.

"I was hoping we could speak somewhere more... privately."

The hatred of men spiked as everyone around them heard her words.

"Just the two of us."

And Jake felt like his school life was truly not going to be a nice and peaceful time.

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

## **Chapter 428: Bit of Dragon Lore**

Jake had been put on the spot, and while he had wanted to reject the invitation, his curiosity had eventually won out. And in hindsight, he was glad he did as he came to see much of the Order he hadn't before.

He had not gone home after the lesson but went with the female dragonkin through a portal to what was essentially a buzzing metropolitan area with bars, cafes, restaurants, and shops everywhere. All of them catered to members of the Order, and it was truly a massive area.

Passing the gateway had also shrugged off all the annoying followers who had stared after Jake like he was evil incarnate. No, he was not looking forward to meeting many of them again at the lesson the next day.

The two of them headed towards a café that offered private rooms to have their discussion. Using personal residences for discussions with people you didn't trust was rarely done, and Jake could see why. The rules of safety seemed to primarily dominate in public areas, and giving someone access to a residence also meant those people would potentially see your secrets.

What plants you grew, the laboratory, books in the library, or just something as simple as the atmospheric mana were all clues. That poison alchemists of an evil snake-worshipping cult were secretive didn't come as a surprise.

Jake and the dragonkin soon found themselves within a cozy room as an attendant brought them both a cup of some weird drink Jake didn't recognize. However, he felt the toxins within it. He had allowed the dragonkin to order for them, and he didn't think she wanted to poison him. Well, okay, she did want to poison him, but the good kind of poison.

"So, the elephant in the room?" Jake eventually said, his Tongue of the Myriad Races doing work to translate the figure of speech to something understandable. The source of this content is *novel-fire-net*

"I believe an introduction is finally in order before we do that. I am Helenstromoz Emberflight, pleased to make your acquaintance," she said as she nodded.

"Hunter," Jake just said, sticking to his fake name. When he heard the last name of the dragonkin, he already knew what this was about. "What gave me away?"

The dragonkin just smiled. "Many things... it is hard to hide from an A-grade even if you have means to perfectly mask your level and even possess a Bloodline. The mana lingering on your body is from the ninety-third universe, and the knowledge you displayed did not correspond to what a true master would do. Finally, during the brief discussion with you, he switched languages a total of seventeen times without you noticing... in fact, I have already spoken three during this brief talk. Even if you do have a translation skill, they don't tend to be that effective, and more often than not, you switch language fluidly with your conversation partner. You did not," Helenstromoz said with a light smile.

Jake didn't even know what to say. He had never even considered Tongue to be a dead giveaway, though in hindsight, perhaps he should have. The problem was Jake had no counter currently, so he just took a drink from the poison the restaurant offered. It was tasty as hell, and he gladly just savored the taste for a few moments before answering. "That answered the how he found out, but not why you are here. Helenstromoz, was it?"

"He suspected you had a Bloodline and sent me to check for obvious reasons," Helenstromoz answered. "And please, just call me Helen. The Stromoz suffix is used to communicate someone is truly a dragon or at least was a true dragon at some point. Us descendants of true dragons are allowed to also have it, so it is truly more about status than anything else."

"While I am thankful for the dragon lore, it doesn't truly answer the question of why you chose to come and stay for a lesson you clearly did not need and bring me here for a private discussion. It took you five seconds to confirm I had a Bloodline, didn't it?" Jake said, shaking his head as he took another sip of poison drink. Yep, definitely a fan.

Helen seemed to study his responses quite closely as Jake enjoyed his drink. She also took a sip herself as she spoke again.

"Bloodlines are rare. I assume you know this despite coming from a new universe?"

Jake just nodded in confirmation, as while he didn't think it was common knowledge Bloodlines even existed back on Earth, it would be odd for him not to have found out.

"These Bloodlines come in various forms, and whenever a new universe is integrated into the multiverse, many new ones appear with it. There are few better ways for a faction to improve their organizational strength than quickly making contact and hopefully integrating such a Bloodline into their ranks. Though I assume you already have a backer or an organization you belong to? Besides the Order, of course," Helen asked after more or less telling Jake she was there on a recruitment mission.

"I do indeed have a backer if you can call it that, but no faction besides the Order," Jake said. He knew acting like he didn't would be moronic as he had just spent hundreds of thousands of AC on a single lesson, something he clearly couldn't afford on his own. Hence the only explanation – besides the truth – was that he had a backer who gave him points.

Helen smiled a bit as she wondered out loud. "I do wonder who it could be... not even A-grades can toss around that many AC on a single lesson they barely get anything out of. An S-grade? Gods are out of the question as the Malefic One has already blessed you... they must be quite a figure in the Order, are they not?"

Clearly, she was baiting him to reveal something. He also knew why she ruled gods out. Why would a god invest in him when the only ones to benefit would be Villy? The reason why gods helped mortals was to get rewards from the system based on the



performance of those they blessed. It was part of the reason Jake didn't feel that guilty about his one-sided relationship with Villy as he knew he also helped his snake god pal, just in ways Jake didn't see himself.

As for Helen's questioning: "My backer does indeed have some influence in the Order, but why is that of any concern to you?"

"All I am looking to know is, are you associated with any faction besides the Order of the Malefic Viper? The Order does not restrict where one belongs or has any true requirements of loyalty to the faction itself, so if you don't, I just wanted to let you know there are many doors open to you. Of course, it will require an evaluation to know the true nature of your Bloodline, but if it is deemed of high quality and beneficial, these factions will gladly support you," she said as she also took another sip of her drink. "Naturally, this also depends on if your backer agrees. Just know that true multiverse factions can offer far more than any individual."

*Yeah, I kinda doubt that,* Jake thought. Probably didn't count if that individual was a Primordial.

"I have no interest in joining any faction as of the current time," Jake answered, shaking his head.

"Eventually, you will have to align yourself with one unless you plan on fully dedicating yourself to the Order. Tell me, how much do you know of the Emberflight?" Helen asked. She seemed amicable still, but Jake did get the feeling she wasn't happy he so quickly rejected her offer.

"That it is a Dragonflight?" Jake just said with a shrug. He knew what Dragonflights were. They were collections of dragons, and he knew it was hard to be recognized as a Dragonflight. But to be fair, he had only done some cursory reading.

"The Emberflight is one of the nine Dragonflight of the Draconian Accords and is the most powerful faction of the red dragons. We have hundreds of publicly-appearing gods in our ranks and stand as a true top faction of the multiverse with a presence in all universes," she said proudly.

Jake got the feeling he was meant to be very impressed, but he had been firmly desensitized after spending too long with Villy. He was curious, though.

"What are these Draconian Accords?"

"A long time ago, the different dragon races were at war but were eventually brought together and formed an Accord under the leadership of the Primordial known as the Wyrmgod. The Wyrmgod later established Nevermore and no longer has any connection to the accords, but an alliance and close working relationship still persist.



There were originally only five Dragonflights in it, the Emberflight one of them," she explained, Jake really getting his fill of old dragon lore.

Helen also clearly enjoyed sharing it, as she was patient with Jake's lack of what he didn't doubt was general knowledge. She did take a jab, though. "I would recommend you take a few history lessons if possible."

"I'll think about it," Jake took the jab. "However, my answer remains the same. I currently have no interest in joining a faction. I am not saying this won't change in the future, but I am not the type to be loyal to factions, and I don't tend to deal well with authority."

He wanted to distance himself and give a reason, but she didn't seem fazed in the slightest.

"I understand. Your Bloodline relates to resisting and somehow emitting a presence far more powerful than you actually are. That it has innate properties of pride and unwillingness to submit to those more powerful only strikes me as natural."

Jake nodded along, gladly confirming that is what his Bloodline did, as he and Villy had agreed on that being a good idea a while ago. Better they thought that was all it did.

"You seem to understand my Bloodline well... but I have no clue what yours does," Jake asked, finally getting to the part he actually cared about himself. So far, he only knew of two Bloodlines. His own and Eron's. Learning more about different ones only struck him as helpful.

"I have a version of the Bloodline of the main clan back in the Land of Embers. I cannot share the exact details of the Bloodline as I am under oath, but I am authorized to say it involves the manipulation of fire magic, the concept of flames, and the concept of time," Helen briefly explained. "Only members of the Order can know the true description of it, and mine is a bit of a mutated version."

"They can mutate?" Jake asked, a bit surprised. Did that mean he could change or evolve his Bloodline? Why had Villy never mention-

"My father was a dragon while my mother was an elf. Both of them had Bloodlines, and they merged to form mine. You seem to not know much about Bloodlines. Did your benefactor never explain?" she asked, actually sounding a bit confused.

"Yeah, why didn't he explain," Jake sent to Villy right there and then.

*"Because I didn't bless you with the intent of having you act like a prize-bull and pump out children left and right. Preferably with other people who possess Bloodlines to hope for them not only to get lucky and inherit one Bloodline but get the Bloodlines of both parents and even have them merge into something useful,"* Villy quickly answered. *"It is*

*gambling for a good result. The hatchling you see before you likely have tens of thousands of siblings who are little more than failed products in the eyes of the Dragonflight."*

"He only explained a little bit, but not many details," Jake answered after listening to Villy's explanation.

"I see," she said, sighing a bit. She finally took out a small token with a red dragon on it and handed it to Jake. "I would like to at least invite you to a more formal chat. Even if you joining us isn't an option, we can perhaps at least discuss some other arrangement?"

Jake looked at the token before picking it up. "I will think about it, but for now, I just want to focus on my lessons and, of course, the happenings of the ninety-third Universe and the opportunities offered there. Grow in power, you know?"

"Very well, we would prefer to see you at a higher grade too," she finally relented as she got up. "It was enlightening to meet you... Hunter, was it?"

He just nodded as he also got up, but not before quickly finishing his tasty drink.

"Please do come by for a visit at the very least. In the token is also my contact information for the Order Token, so please feel free if your curiosity gets the better of you or if there is anything you need to know."

With those words, she left, with Jake following after. Outside they split up as she headed towards a wall with a teleportation circle on. Jake considered staying and checking out the entertainment district a bit more but ultimately decided to just head back home as he wanted to check in with Meira, and he had another lesson in like an hour.

Also... he had some things he wanted to talk to Villy about.

When he got home, he headed for his bedroom again, and as he walked, he asked out loud:

"So... Villy... will this-"

A scaled god suddenly popped up beside him. "You were saying?"

"Can you just pop up like that now?" Jake asked. "Last time, you made quite the entrance."

"Well, of course not. I had to make a good impression on your new slave," Villy defended himself.

“Thinking back, couldn’t you have just done as you first did when I got here and made yourself invisible or something?”

“Jake, the question isn’t if I could or not. The most important thing is,” he said, as he made a long dramatic pause, “I didn’t.”

Jake could recognize once he had lost an argument and proceeded to change the topic. “So, what I wanted to ask was if this kind of thing will keep happening if it becomes more common knowledge I have a Bloodline? Everyone who has a Bloodline can feel I have one, and I am sure some factions will put two and two together after dragon lady approached me.”

“It is likely indeed,” Villy said, nodding.

“That sounds utterly exhausting. And there is no way to hide my Bloodline?” Jake asked a bit desperately.

“Nope, not at all. Ah, but do note most in lower grades cannot feel other Bloodlines as easily as you do. Both you and the other one from Earth have at least partly Perception-based Bloodlines and can thus easily spot others, but not everyone does. That is why that hatchling carried an orb. They are able to create a resonance of sorts when someone with a Bloodline uses one and can scan an area. Pretty much all factions with Bloodlines possess them. Even without it, another person with a Bloodline will feel it if they are close enough or interact with you,” the Viper explained.

“So that means I am fucked?” Jake asked with resignation. “What is stopping some faction from just kidnapping people with Bloodlines and using them as breeding machines?”

Villy seemed to get a bit more serious as he sighed. “I guess I should tell you a bit about Bloodlines and their storied history in the multiverse.”

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## Chapter 429: The History of Bloodlines

Jake and Villy moved to the living room of Jake’s mansion, and when Jake went to grab something to drink, the Viper just pulled out two beer bottles that gave off a response from his Sense of the Malefic Viper. Poison beer, nice.

They sat down across from each other as the Viper leaned back on the couch and began talking.

“Bloodlines have quite the history in the multiverse. As those with Bloodlines are often compared to Transcendents, it only leads to more scrutiny and interest, especially from those who possess neither. Bloodlines were a thing from the beginning, and many of those with Bloodlines in the first universe did grow up to be powerhouses who dominated, even if they failed to make it to godhood. Naturally, as time moved on, many also became gods... but their survival rate back then was just abysmal.”

“Why?” Jake asked, a bit confused. Did a Bloodline not give an advantage if it was beneficial?

“Hm... did you know not a single one of us Primordials had Bloodlines? At least not ones anyone knew about?” Villy asked

“No,” Jake shook his head. “I had kind of assumed someone did... though it is true I didn’t feel one from Valdemar, and does the current Eversmile even have one? I didn’t feel it. Not from Stormild either, now that I think about it...”

“Stormild does not have one as far as I know, while Eversmile does, his is just hidden due to the nature of his Bloodline. Well, he may have had it always, but no one knew, not even others with Bloodlines. The point is no one with a known Bloodline became a god during the first Era.”

“That is odd,” Jake thought out loud.

“No, not if you understand the landscape back then. You see, people are greedy. Beasts, humans, elementals, it doesn’t matter the race. We are all greedy for power. So when we see someone with something we don’t have, and we don’t know how to get it... we try anyway to take it, no matter how futile the effort. If you had a Bloodline back then, you had a target on your back. In the beginning, because people wanted to capture you and try to extract it, with even rumors spreading that you could gain a Bloodline by consuming someone who had one,” the Viper explained, shaking his head.

“That sounds fucking rough,” Jake said.

“Oh, it was. This was how the entire first Era went. Most with Bloodlines were slaughtered before realizing their potential, and those who survived lived as test subjects until their death. It was a curse more than anything else. Some with Bloodlines were used as Bloodline Detectors and were strutted around to find others with Bloodlines to capture them. Towards the end of the first Era, I don’t think a single person in S-grade even had a Bloodline.

“When the second Era began, people seemed to have gotten the message that you can’t steal Bloodlines, especially as we Primordials spread it with our nascent factions.

However, it was discovered that they could be passed down, so I guess you can imagine the next step in the evolution of Bloodline hunting?" Villy asked grimly.

"Treat them like cattle?" Jake asked with a deep frown.

"Bingo. I would argue it was even worse than before, especially due to how propagation works with the system. Have we ever had the talk about the flowers and the bees?" Villy asked teasingly.

"No... but I have a feeling I know. You can't force it, can you?"

"Nope, you can't. Anyone in E-grade has enough control of their body to ignore physiological stimuli, and even if they don't, you can't make kids without both parties consciously wanting to. Giving birth to a new life takes intent the same as most kinds of magic. The female cannot get pregnant, and the male cannot impregnate unless they both wish for it to happen. In what should not have been a surprise to absolutely anyone, people with Bloodlines that have practically been turned into sex slaves aren't exactly excited about becoming parents. Women and men alike were forced into being nothing more than cattle for their masters or dying. It was a shitshow," Villy explained. One could feel the disgust in his voice... as well as a wave of deep-seated anger. Jake knew Villy was trying to hide it, but Jake felt the bloodlust and hatred subtly leak into the god's presence.

Jake also felt disgusted as he nevertheless asked. "Did that ever lead to anything?"

"A few times. If they captured them young and indoctrinated them into pretty much making them true members of the clan... some also just broke and began helping out of desperation. Ultimately, it wasn't efficient in the least, and there is also the fact that you want the one with the Bloodline to be powerful. The Bloodline alone is nice, but the Records of the parents also matter a lot," Villy explained, as he continued.

"No, the ones who got the most out of it were those who used a more diplomatic approach. The ones who genuinely made them members of their factions, nurtured them, allowed them to prosper, and even sometimes had them end up the new leaders. In fact, this is how many still-existing factions began. There was also a growing tendency to just leave those with Bloodlines alone, sometimes watching from afar and hoping for them to amass power themselves. However, as I said, these were the good ones. The number of hunters looking for those with Bloodlines was far more prevalent." The most update novels are published on [novel•fire•net](#)

"Wait, but only those with Bloodlines can find others. How the hell did they hunt them down? I doubt those with Bloodlines themselves would help, and unless something was drastically different back then, I don't see every team of hunters having someone with a Bloodline enthralled, as you mentioned before..." Jake commented.

“That is the neat part,” Villy said. “They didn’t. Some kid has a weird hair color? Probably a Bloodline. Kid is talented? Bloodline. Odd affinity they are good at? Bloodline. Anything at all making you slightly stand out from the masses? Probably a Bloodline. It even expanded to beasts where variants were often confused as ones having Bloodlines... the entire situation was utterly fucked and in no way sustainable long-term. Yet it continued, and this craze came in waves. However, there was a shift as more with Bloodlines came to be in power, especially when ones reached godhood. Bloodlines began to propagate, and blindly hunting them down became frowned upon, and it became an activity simply done covertly.”

“So me getting captured is still a possibility; they will just be secretive about it?” Jake asked a bit curtly.

“No. Nobody will dare try,” Villy said, shaking his head.

“Because of my Blessing, I reckon?”

“No, even without it. I said this was how it continued back then... until something happened that made it change. Until they went after someone they shouldn’t have, and all hell was unleashed upon them, leading to a treaty that still stands today, banning the abductions, enslavement, and coercion of those with Bloodlines for purposes of procreations,” the Viper said. When he got to the middle part, Jake felt the killing intent as the air in the living room nearly warped just from the leaked emotions.

Jake wanted to pry but knew better. Instead, he asked a question, slightly changing the topic. “Who was behind this treaty? And how will it be enforced?”

“The treaty was overseen and deployed by all of us Primordials during the seventh Era. It was signed by nearly all publicly acting gods at the time. All of us also act as executioners of any who breaks this treaty. The most known example was during the eighty-second Era when a Pantheon emerged that didn’t seem to care. They had many gods among them and were desperate for expansion. At the same time, a small clan that was rapidly growing to power appeared within their territory, all having powerful Bloodlines. The Pantheon’s leader was a god who was most known for having fought the Starsiezing Titan, another Primordial, and the fight having been mostly deemed a draw. He was confident, but he felt like he needed more. So he looked to this small clan and saw the potential of their Bloodline. He wanted it to expand his faction’s power. However, this small clan did not agree to merge, so... he forced them.”

Jake listened closely as nothing came as a surprise. He knew factions could be ruthless.

“Now, forcing them to join? Meh, that happens. Who cares. The problem was that he also forced them into propagating their Bloodline. He forced the women of the clan to be his own mistresses to sire powerful children and the men to copulate with his own

daughters. This was caught within a week of it happening... and this moronic god learned the consequences of breaking the treaty.

"Jake, if there is one thing I want you to understand, it is that of all the treaties in existence, this may be the one no one ever dares break. Even I would not dare do it. Back then, seven Primordials descended. Umbra went, Snappy went in my place, more than ten thousand gods surrounded the planet the Pantheon called home. A slaughter began, the god in charge fled to his realm, where he was promptly followed and killed within. Even if he was stronger in there... even if he was a top talent, one not even another Primordial could kill in single combat, he was no match to the combined might of what may as well have been the entire multiverse. The entire Pantheon was killed and every single member of god's faction. Trillions died that day, setting an example."

"Have any Primordial broken it, or won't they dare to either? I have a hard time seeing someone like Eversmile purposefully avoiding doing certain things just due to the opinions of others," Jake asked skeptically.

"Eversmile may be able to hide it even if he does break the treaty, but he won't. Eversmile is a bit of a bastard, but he is not a liar. His word means more than you can understand due to the Path he walks. A promise made by him is more binding and more meaningful than any contract," Villy just shook his head.

Jake nodded along slowly, still believing Eversmile was an asshole. "Anyway, to conclude, this treaty means I am more or less a protected person due to my Bloodline when it comes to kidnappings and such?"

"Only if they kidnap you for your Bloodline, and only if the kidnapping is to research or forcefully spread the Bloodline. Not that there is much other reason to. As I am sure you can imagine, they would have loved to make Bloodline Holders into slaves, but you can't enslave people with Bloodlines as we talked about before," the scaled god explained again.

Jake was beginning to get a good understanding of the situation by now. "The method you talked about working back then still works, though. Integration."

"Yep," Villy said with a smile. "If a faction recruits someone with a Bloodline as a member or even just bribes them or pays them to join temporarily as mercenaries to have them spread their Bloodline, it is perfectly allowed."

"Sounds like people with Bloodlines are still treated as commodities," Jake frowned.

"Everyone is. If you are a powerful expert, you are an asset. Young talent is nurtured for the benefits they can bring... a god blesses someone for what they can get out of it. We are all selfish assholes in the multiverse. The Bloodline Treaty was not made purely out of altruistic reasons either. The ones who signed it tended to have large factions already



and will thus have an easier time simply recruiting those with Bloodlines – something they would prefer to do either way.”

“To circle back... I am still kind of fucked, aren't I? They just won't kidnap me but try other “legal” methods...” Jake sighed.

“Yep, big time. Honeypots are aplenty ahead on your Path. Especially the more you progress. If you had a kid in your current grade, it would not be stronger than E-grade, while if you reach C-grade and above you, humans can have kids who are born at D-grade. That is the max, though... unless you go for some high elf or maybe a dragon? In that case, you may be able to go for higher grade babies,” Villy smiled teasingly.

“You know what?” Jake said, returning the smile. “I don't think I am having that conversation with you.”

“Fine, fine. But just one final piece of advice. Don't have any offspring for now. In fact, wait as long as possible. Records are essential in anything, and the more children you have, the more spread out those Records will be. The chance of someone inheriting the Bloodline also goes down the more children you have, with the chance being higher for the first child and only falling from there. Of course, you could make up for it by quantity – a reason why male Bloodline Holders and especially Bloodline Patriarchs – are more popular than Bloodline Matriarchs,” Villy finally finished.

“I wasn't planning on starting a family anyway, so it's not like that is an issue,” Jake shrugged. He didn't even have a girlfriend yet, and there was no way he would get bribed into it. He was also pretty confident in resisting honeypots.

“Ah, but do feel free to have some fun; the honeypots will gladly entertain you. I am sure there are many fine ladies interested in-“

“Villy,” Jake interrupted. “I am too sober for that conversation, and I got a lesson in like fifteen minutes, so now isn't the time to get smashed.”

The Viper just snickered for a moment before he quickly acted all solemn. “I can't believe how fast they grow up... just a year or so ago, my little Chosen was running around shirtless in a forest fighting local overgrown wildlife, while now he is all grown up and going to school. He is even being responsible with his lessons!”

Jake was about to shoot back with a snarky comment as he felt a presence enter his sphere. It was Meira who was heading over. She was clearly unable to sense Villy, who was currently feeling no different from a normal mortal, and when Jake looked at the snake god, he just shrugged.

“What? If you plan to have her stick around, she may as well get used to it because I may or may not teleport by once in a while when I feel like it.”

“Can’t just make yourself invisible?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“The question isn’t if I can, but if I will. A question to which the answer is no.”

Jake just sighed as he stared into the ceiling, hoping whatever progress he had made with Meira wouldn’t be shattered the moment she walked in on him and the Viper sitting in the living room chilling with a beer each.

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## **Chapter 430: Relationships Are Hard. Oh, and Neurotoxins**

Meira was briskly walking towards the living room as it was on the way to the mansion’s bedroom where her Master usually resided. If he wasn’t there, he should be in the laboratory. She had gone looking for him already once an hour or so ago, where he should have returned from his lesson, but it appeared he had other engagements. That made sense; he was an important figure after all.

She herself had also gone to a single lesson so far. Meira had felt incredibly out of place, but no one had really commented on her presence or spoken to her. They had just left her alone as she had listened to the teacher about finding her own Path... something Meira had never even considered doing before. Something she still had to admit she found unrealistic.

Making her way forward, she believed she heard voices from the living room. It was difficult to tell as the materials the mansion was made of had phenomenal sound isolation tens if not hundreds of times more effective than what buildings back at her clan had been built with.

A bit nervous, she considered if her Master had visitors and if there were, then why she hadn’t been called to attend to them. Then again, perhaps it was something private, so she reconsidered if she should just wait outside until the visitor left.

Ultimately, she decided to show herself. Something she actually felt a bit proud of, as it was one of the most important things from the lesson she had taken: to be assertive and take control of your own destiny. That included not hesitating as much in your daily life but moving forward even if there may be some difficulties.

Besides, she didn’t believe her Master would get disappointed or angry even if she entered. At worst, she would be made to leave, right?

With that in mind, she opened the door into the mansion's living room as she bowed and said. "Excuse me, I-"

She instantly stopped as she saw the two people sitting there. Her Master on one side holding a bottle in his hand and a scaled being she would be unable to ever forget. She instantly fell to her knees and placed her head against the floor as she deeply regretted just walking in.

"This one greets the Malefic One!"

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"Meira, just get up. There is no reason for that," her Master said. Meira was a bit confused at the command and was conflicted if she should follow it or not. On the one hand, the orders of her Master were above anything else, but on the other hand, it was the Malefic One...

"This is my mansion, right?" she heard her Master say, directed not at her but the Malefic One.

"Yep. Even if we can argue if you own it or not, you are most definitely a legal tenant."

"In that case, I repeat, please get up, Meira. You also live here, and you most certainly don't have to bow to someone within your own home," her Master said again. It was the kind of thing he had said so many times before like it was natural...

"Breaking through a lifetime of conditioning is not done with a few words Jake," she heard the Malefic One say in a weird voice that sounded odd to her... it was almost friendly?

Meira was still not daring to look up, but she heard footsteps as someone approached her. Based on the sound, it was her Master, and she felt him place a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, just get up... he won't do anything, and nothing will happen if you do. I promise."

"Big promises from a D-grade with a literal Primordial in the room," the Malefic One said, making Meira shiver again.

"Villy, how about I reveal myself as your Chosen and begin spreading the word that you have decided to declare war on all mushrooms and initiate a righteous crusade?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me!"

Meira just knelt there, shaking and a bit confused. She truly couldn't comprehend what was happening as the two seemed to do what she could only describe as banter? It just

didn't make any sense or conform to her worldview. A Chosen was an instrument of a god... their mortal representation, prophets, and sometimes even avatars. But... her Master and the Malefic One wasn't like that, or was this just how it was supposed to work? Wait... were they trying to fool her? Was this some kind of elaborate experiment she was just too dumb to understand? Send her to a lesson about finding her own Path, just to-

"Fine," the Malefic One said as she felt another presence approach. She couldn't resist as she felt her own body moving, and she was lifted to stand upright as she stared right at the Malefic One. She couldn't even blink as she felt like passing out upon looking into the eyes of the Primordial.

"Girl. Jake and I are friends, and I do agree that with your presence being a continued element, this entire thing would get boring soon. I have absolutely no interest in you, and Jake is a simple-minded fellow who genuinely has no interest in treating you as a slave. You aren't worth an experiment. You aren't interesting enough for me to care about outside of your connection to my buddy. You are just a slave who got extremely lucky to find yourself where you are right now, so thank your luck and be grateful. And for the sake of everyone's sanity, just relax. I won't do anything to you as long as Jake has any interest in you."

Meira wanted to open her mouth as the words echoed in her head, but the situation became too much for her as she felt her brain slowly shut down, and she passed out. Her last thought was her wondering if she would ever wake up again after treating not only her Master but the Malefic One with such disrespect and ignoring the order she had just been given.

--

"Well, that went exactly as expected," Villy said as he shrugged. Jake caught Meira with a few strings of mana and lifted her over to a couch, where he laid her down.

"While I don't think you were the nicest, I don't think you said anything to pass out over," Jake said, wondering out loud.

"Jake, you repeatedly misunderstand some very basic things of the multiverse. While I can hide my presence and appearance and everything else, that entire subterfuge becomes meaningless if they actually know who I am. The instinctive suppression remains, and they will still feel like they are in the presence of a Primordial the second they become aware of me," Villy shook his head. "It makes it impossible to have any meaningful and genuine interactions with those of lower grades. Even if they act normal, that is little more than having a constant fight to resist and not at all enjoyable for either party."

Jake frowned a bit at this. He knew it was a thing – kind of – but he couldn't really relate for obvious reasons. He couldn't imagine the feeling they had, as he, quite frankly, was incapable of feeling it. It was like asking a blind person to think about colors.

But... he also understood him being him was the only reason he and a Primordial could get along as they did.

"I guess that means having house parties with you attending wouldn't work," Jake sighed.

"Sadly not, at least not if people know who I am, and if they don't, then what is even the point?" the snake god also sighed.

"True. I guess it will take Meira a while to just at least get partly used to it, at least enough to deal. From what I know, being near me helps build up resistance," Jake answered.

"It does, but it does not mean they will suddenly be okay. They still know logically they are in my presence, and they will still be on edge more than when they are around you. They just won't be suppressed in the same fashion, even if they will be suppressed," the Viper explained.

"Hm," Jake frowned. "I guess the only option is for you to invite some of your friends then. You do have other god friends, right?"

"More like subordinates, and they can be even worse than mortals in some circumstances. Anyone besides Duskleaf, you, and a few other gods I would consider myself friends; there really isn't anyone. And getting such a crowd together would be a momentous occasion and no-doubt lead to much interest and scrutiny," Villy said, shaking his head at the notion.

Jake just shrugged as he swept the beer bottle off the table. "Guess it is just the two of us and the occasional Duskleaf then."

"Better that way," Villy agreed. "And it isn't like mortals can't get more used to me. I have had mortal servants in the past, and I have met plenty of mortals. I will forever have to deal with either reverence, fear, or both, but that I am used to."

"Life is truly lonely at the top," Jake chuckled.

"A little less than it used to be, though," the god said as he also took a drink of his own beer.

The two of them chatted a bit more about unimportant matters before Jake had to leave for his next lesson. He did feel a bit bad about just leaving Meira passed out on the

couch, so he left a note before he left through the gateway. This lesson was in neurotoxicology, so that should be fun.

Vilastromoz appeared in his divine realm as he left Jake's little mansion. He smirked a bit to himself as he looked at the bottle in his hand. He let it go, seeing it slowly be disintegrated by the passive mist dominating his realm as he closed his eyes, deep in thought.

A moment later, he opened them again as he teleported once more, appearing in a small oasis of his realm. The only place where life existed in what was otherwise a land of desolation.

The Viper looked at the two obelisks in the center, the perfect black obsidian stone unblemished and the runes upon them forever humming with power. The talk today had brought back memories that he was incapable of forgetting... quite literally. He went over and put his hand on the smaller of the two obelisks as he once more closed his eyes, just allowing himself to be stuck in the past for a second before letting go again.

He looked at the far larger obelisk as Vilastromoz smiled faintly. "Yeah yeah, I know; I'm doing fine..."

Talking to himself was not healthy... but he knew exactly what she would have said and done.

"Even if I do now have a friend to hang out with, I am not forgetting you two," he smiled. "In fact... I believe this time outside of my realm has led me closer than ever."

Jake returned from his lesson far more tired than when he left. He walked a bit wobbly as his one leg wasn't quite able to move yet, and for some reason, he couldn't open the one eyelid. Well, okay, he knew why. The lesson included some practical portions. In other words, he got infused by the teacher, who used some kind of poison magic on him that numbed his entire damn body.

This did allow Palate to do work, but even with it in legendary rarity, he wasn't a match for the C-grade teacher's poison magic. The woman was a real hard-ass and just applied some extra on those who managed to resist, and with her peak C-grade power, no one present could resist, not even the one other C-grade Jake detected.

As he wobbled into his residence, he was met by Meira, who sat kneeling in the entrance chamber, having clearly waited for him. When she saw him walk weirdly, she hurriedly asked. "Ma... what is wrong?"

Jake didn't feel like correcting her as he waved it off. "Neurotoxins, part of a lesson. More importantly, how are you feeling?"

He hadn't expected what she did next – even if he probably should have – as she practically threw herself to the floor as she pressed her head against the tiled floor. “I apologize for disappointing the Malefic One and the Chosen like such! I swear I wi-“

“Meira... this is what we talked about not being necessary,” Jake just smiled as he shook his head. “And don't you have a lesson starting in a bit?”

She looked almost surprised at Jake mentioning it. Jake wasn't sure if she was surprised he knew she had a lesson or when it was, or that he still wanted her to go to lessons. Nevertheless, she nodded in confirmation.

“Well, then you better get going.”

“Is it certain I should not offer any assistance?” Meira asked unsurely.

“No need. This is part of the experience. I am learning what the poison does to my body to better understand the effects of neurotoxins. And, Meira, what the Viper said is the truth. I don't wish you any harm; he doesn't care enough about you to cause you harm, so you are good. Just focus on your lessons and figure out what you want your future to be like,” Jake said, as he shooed her away to get to her own lesson, even if she would be a bit early.

He just wanted her out of the mansion for now as he wanted to hurry over to the lab. He hobbled over as he became able to blink properly again on the way. The neurotoxins had odd effects, and Jake felt like he had a good idea about how it worked even after just one lesson.

Needless to say, the nature of neurotoxins had changed with the system. neurotoxins before the system were toxins that destroyed nerve tissue or were otherwise able to damage them, effectively immobilizing foes. Due to how it worked, high enough doses could easily cause permanent mental damage. He definitely wasn't sure about the detailed way of how neurotoxin worked, but he was sure it had been very sciency.

After the system, some parts of neurotoxins were no longer factors or properties. Mental damage was not a thing anymore. In fact, it wasn't a thing, period. Memories and such ultimately belonged to the soul, same as personality and everything that before resided in the brain, and nothing could directly damage that as it was rooted in the Truesoul.

Nerves were not really a factor either. Jake could have tendons cut, and nerves severed all day, every day, and still be able to move just fine due to his magic body powered by stamina. This meant neurotoxins didn't actually target the body most often, but the metaphysical framework of the body that stamina ran through. This did not cause damage long-term but just temporarily hampered movement. In other words, neurotoxins were simply a restrictive poison.



There were also types that hit the physical body and made them almost in “stasis,” but that was a bit more complicated.

All in all, he was glad he had begun making neurotoxins because he was sure they would be useful in the future. In fact, he was sure all of his lessons would lead to great gains as he felt like he was finally getting into the groove of the entire school thing and was looking forward to all the things it offered.

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## Chapter 431: Slow And Steady Wins the Race

Jake read the book in his bed as he went over the information in a crystal he had gained from a lesson he had taken the day prior. He nodded along as he found everything to be in order, and with a wave of his hand, he destroyed the crystal and scattered the dust with a blast of destructive arcane mana. After all, the fellow student he had gained it from had asked him to.

Well over a month had passed since Jake had entered the Order of the Malefic Viper, and honestly? Things were going well. He had expected way more Bloodline trouble or people trying to start shit with him, but so far, everyone was perfectly civil. Okay, he did have a run-in with one moron in a lesson where they had to spar. The dude had been an overly confident asshole when he was clearly wrong, but Jake chose to be gracious and not assume malice where it may just be ignorance.

However, where there had been most progress wasn't with him. As he was on his bed, he heard a knock on the door, and he opened it to a far more kept-together elf in a white dress as she slightly bowed. “Sir, I have brought the book you requested from the Order Library.”

“Thanks, Meira,” Jake said with a smile as he got off the bed and went over to accept the book. Meira smiled in response as she gave it to him. “Any issues getting it?”

“None. The librarian was very helpful there,” she answered as she bowed again. “I shall return to my studies if there is no other matter Sir needs me to take care of?”

“There isn't. How are the lessons going, by the way?” Jake asked, already knowing the answer for the most part.

"I am doing my utmost and believe I am making acceptable progress," Meira answered with a small embarrassed smile. Jake just smirked a bit in response as he finally allowed her to leave as she scurried away.

Meira felt embarrassed because a teacher had sent her back with a letter of recommendation to her "sponsor." It was a letter that would allow Meira to attend another lesson taught by the same teacher for a heavy discount. The letter was addressed to Jake and had some assumptions within he had cracked up over. However, the crux of it was that Meira was quite a talented healer and had a great talent for metaphysiology – the study of the metaphysical body.

The letter had assumed Meira was an employee of Jake or perhaps just a follower of his. From what Jake had gathered, no one Meira had met during any lessons had even the slightest clue she was a slave or even a servant. As for the lesson, Jake had already allowed her to go; it wasn't even a question to him. But that she had even asked and expressed interest was huge progress.

Her coming out and saying she had a preference or a wish was something the Meira of one month ago would never do. She would just do whatever Jake wanted her to and not even voice her own thoughts. There was also the huge thing she now called him "Sir" and didn't stumble over her words to avoid calling him the banned m-word.

It was slow but steady progress, and in the end, the best method to have her get more comfortable was simply time. She also smiled more and didn't seem as nervous as before.

The only place with absolutely no progress was in the department of randomly visiting gods, AKA Viper visits. The closest to progress there was her being able to leave the area whenever he visited without passing out. Half the time, at least.

Jake himself had also made good progress. He had only gained a single level in his profession, bringing him to level 152, which came from him experimenting a bit in his own time. While that seemed slow – and was compared to Jake's old progress – it was considered good in the Order. In fact, Jake had come to learn that leveling fast was viewed as a fool's game, and he kind of understood why. There was no reason to try and rush through D-grade in a handful of years when you had millennia. Not that Jake would ever take that long, not unless Villy came up with another practice lesson like with Shroud.

As for what he had learned... well, a lot, most of it the most basic there was in any subject. One such area was flasks, where Jake had finally made a few, even if they were quite honestly crap.

***[Flask of Minor Poison Resistance (Inferior)] – A flask giving minor poison resistance against most forms of toxins for a duration of thirty (30) minutes.***

***Requirements: D-grade***

***[Flask of Fortified Mana(Inferior)] – A increasing maximum mana by 50 for a duration of thirty (30) minutes.***

***Requirements: D-grade***

The first gave so little poison resistance it was inconsequential, and it worked before his Palate as they had overlapping effects. So unless Jake made a way better version, it did nothing for him besides doing so he couldn't consume another Flask for a full day, as that was the cooldown.

Secondly was the Flask of Fortified Mana, which was even worse as there once more was overlap with his mask. As his mask increased mana by 25%, the Flask did nothing once more as he had already reached the "cap" of how much he could increase it. He had considered making some for health, but that would take a while to learn. Overall, there were many different flasks Jake was working on, but he quickly concluded it would take a long time to learn to craft the useful ones.

There was also the problem that Jake couldn't make any flasks for those below D-grade no matter how shit they were. This was what Villy had talked about when it came to Records, and apparently, his Myth Originator title just made it worse. So yeah, he could make flasks no one wanted, not even himself.

Not to misunderstand, Flasks could be great. They fell into a category a bit like his own Arcane Awakening and functioned as temporary boosting items. The best ones came with drawbacks, especially those circumventing the equipment stat cap from gear. In fact, there was a lot of overlap between equipment and Flasks. If Jake had a helm that granted him super fire magic resistance, he could not drink a Flask giving him even more fire resistance. However, he could drink a Flask giving him general magic resistance, or instead of resisting fire magic, gave him a temporary anti-fire shield with a set absorption amount that didn't take any advantage of his fire resistance. So yeah, if you had the right Flask for the right situation, they could be amazing.

And this actually led to a great segue because the biggest competitor for Flasks when it came to alchemical products were pills. Pills were actually a big competitor to like... everything. Pills could take so many damn forms and do pretty much everything there was, for one simple reason that honestly sounded so dumb Jake didn't believe it when the teacher said it the first time:

"Pills are just Potions, Elixirs, Flasks, or whatever else liquid product condensed and turned into a solid form. The crafting method differs, but ultimately the same concepts apply, and the system recognizes them as equivalent. A healing pill will trigger the usual potion cooldown, a stat-increasing pill will count the same as any elixir, and a pill increasing your Strength temporarily will share all cooldowns and limits as a Flask."

So... yeah. This meant Jake had no interest in becoming a pill-focused alchemist even if pills had some advantages such as their smaller form-factor and their far longer shelf-life, but it often came at the cost of a near-negligible reduction in effect and a small increase in cost.

Besides that, he truly dove into the world of poisons. Neurotoxins were, of course, something he researched, but he also learned to make poison of different affinities, and he had especially two new types of poison he would be moving forward with and actively use in combat when he felt comfortable enough with their potency.

The first of which was one making full use of Jake's dark affinity.

**[Dark Shade Poison (Common)] – A poison with dark affinity properties, infecting and corroding the energies of the target. Any target infected by Dark Shade Venom will suffer reduced Perception and damage. This poison is incredibly difficult to detect and heal but deals nearly no damage and is easily cleansed by certain types of magic.**

This type of poison was incredibly valuable in prolonged battles and against certain foes. It was an insidious poison that would dig deep and slip into every bit of the target and, most importantly, was incredibly difficult to get rid of once infected. This did have some hidden benefits that were a primary reason Jake was so excited to learn it.

Sense of the Malefic Viper allowed Jake to feel his own poison better, especially when it was infected within someone. This poison would function as a scanner of sorts and allow Jake to easily keep track of a foe even if they didn't notice they were infected. He was already theorizing an even better version made solely as a tracking poison, but that was a good ways away. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT ***novel★fire★net***

Secondly was a type of poison Jake dearly needed.

**[Draining Lightning Poison (Inferior)] – A poison with lightning affinity properties, dealing significant damage and draining the mana of any entity it comes into contact with. This poison is incredibly fast-acting and will often expend all its potency within moments.**

Jake still remembered the first time he had set foot upon the cloud island with Hawkie. How he had been utterly embarrassed by what was quite honestly a weak elemental and been forced to learn some basic magic to have a fighting chance. Back then, none of his poison had worked as he only knew hemotoxin and necrotic toxins, and they only worked on biological beings. His blood was the best thing he had, and even that wasn't good.

Even before coming to the Order that hadn't changed in the least, and even after Fangs upgraded and he got the better venom, it was still ultimately reliant on his blood. If Jake

met an elemental or even something like the Altmar Census Golem, he was in for a bad time.

This type of poison changed that. The lightning affinity was the bane of mana and consumed it actively. Jake remembered briefly talking to his brother about it, and he did know that Caleb's dark lightning didn't only drain mana but all resources the target possessed. Jake was not going for that, as while it drained everything, that meant the potency was spread out.

What Jake wanted was pure lightning intent on only draining mana. A poison that would be effective against mana barriers and elementals alike. Of course, if he faced a lightning elemental, he would still be in for a bad time, but he was confident in working up another poison to fight those.

Jake had also dabbled in many other areas to shore up weaknesses, and he was still in the early stages, but every day was rapid progress.

However, there was one area in which Jake had made no progress. There was a type of poison Jake had wanted to make for a good while, and he believed he would be able to do it by now, but no matter what he did, it just never worked out.

Arcane poison still eluded him. The problem was in the very essence of Jake's affinity. His affinity was one of balancing destruction and stability - about controlling that equilibrium or willingly leaning into one part near-entirely.

The key to his issues was in the word control. His affinity needed constant control, or it would be either pure stability or pure destruction. No in-between. It worked due to Jake influencing the energy with his will, but what happened when it became an object? Well, it either turned into what was basically crystalized mana, or it drained itself instantly by turning into pure destructive energy.

No matter what he tried, he had seen no solution in sight. He did find it a bit weird he could make arcane mana potions, but quickly discovered the reason... because he didn't really? It did contain his arcane energy in a stable format, but the moment he ingested it, it once more came under the control of his will and thus could function as expected.

Well, this did mean he could maybe make an arcane poison that could only poison himself, but he didn't see any use for this. Okay, Jake had to confess he had tried to see if he could make a cheat to regen mana through Palate or something, but it had resulted in Jake still dealing more damage than he regenerated.

Jake hadn't had any lessons in formations or anything related to awakening the Pollendust Bee Queen yet, either, and he had yet to touch any combat classes. There were only so many hours in a day, and Jake was swarmed as it was. He did have a plan in mind, and as he finished lessons, he opened up his schedule. It was often a bad idea

for him to continue in the same lane before fully digesting what he learned. Hence he planned on beginning lessons in formations and one on refining Beastcores once he was done with the one he did about making pills and the two about flasks.

And that was about it for Jake's time in the Academy so far. He had been busy, but so had everyone. However, soon there would be a small break-day of sorts for many of them as an event was coming up. The World Congress.

It was a bit odd, but every World Congress was at the same time. Jake had considered this weird as hell because he clearly remembered it being triggered by a hundred claimed Pylons back then on Earth, and it wasn't like every planet of the ninety-third universe claimed a hundred at the same time.

Well, it turned out the one-hundred claimed just meant you got the announcement seven days early. He discovered others had only gotten the notification a day before with not even a hundred claimed yet, with other planets getting the notification weeks before. This was primarily for planets with far more sapient life than Earth.

The reason why this mattered now was that Jake had gotten a nice little system announcement.

**Announcement to all Nobles: The Second World Congress will commence in 24 hours. Any noble in possession of- or ruling a Pylon can attend, as well as any participant of the First World Congress.**

**Due to your presence in another universe, it is not possible to bring any representatives with you. If accepted, you will be teleported once the World Congress commences.**

It was a bit longer with some fluff, but in essence, Jake was golden and could attend without leaving the Order. He had already had a brief talk with Miranda, and she confirmed she could bring along people and would have Lillian and Neil come with her once again. Neil for space mage business, Lillian for Miranda-helping business.

With the upcoming World Congress, many from the ninety-third universe were making preparations, but someone had also taken the chance now that many were free. Irin, the succubus, had sent Jake an invitation at the behest of this person. The organizer was someone pretty unknown to Jake, but he was pretty sure it was that human-elven pair based on Irin's description.

That's right, it was his first official party after entering the Order.

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## Chapter 432: Party Prepping

Jake had done something he had never thought he would do. In fact, he was pretty sure no one would have ever thought the current situation that was currently playing out as possible.

He stood in a dressing room as an elf wearing a fancy robe scrutinized his appearance and talked to an attendant about getting a new type of cloth Jake had never heard of. The attendant quickly ran for it as the tailor spoke.

“No, no, you need something to truly bring forth that ferocious look of yours. One that can emphasize those wonderful eyes and mask properly!” the elf said with much fervor.

“I did like the first set quite a bit, and to truly show his personality and interests, how about embroidering the cloak it with mushroom symbols?” a fourth person said. It was a scalekin with dark green scales and a cheeky smile that looked on as Jake was getting outfitted.

“Yeah, that is never going to happen,” Jake rejected instantly.

“I must agree; it would not at all go with his style!” the tailor said, fully backing up Jake. A smart man, it seemed.

The scalekin, who also happened to be the leader of the Order and a Primordial, just scuffed in disappointment as he held up both his hands. “Fine, but at least keep the snake symbol on the back of the robe.”

“Naturally, anything else would be blasphemous as he holds the Blessing of the Malefic One!” the tailor said, looking offended at Villy like he had truly spoken out of turn.

“Yeah, Villy, don’t act all blasphemous,” Jake agreed teasingly.

“I would never! None is greater than the magnificent Malefic Viper! I cannot imagine anyone acting blasphemously, or even worse, heretically towards such a being!” Villy practically yelled, earning a satisfied nod from the tailor.

“Well said! But who would even dare to be a heretic?” the tailor said as he shook his head, chuckling.

Villy and Jake exchanged a look and a smile just as the attendant returned, bringing a rectangular piece of cloth. It was to be made into some kind of shawl, but Jake quickly rejected it. The tailor was a bit disappointed but relented as he agreed on going with what he called a “warrior look” rather than a sophisticated hidden hunter with a slight desert theme.



As for how Jake had ended up in this situation... well, the answer naturally lay with a certain snake god. Villy had told Jake he needed to look “proper dapper” if he was going to his first party and that he should go out and get a new party outfit.

Jake had agreed as, quite frankly, he did feel a bit out of place, always wearing his full equipment no matter where he went. While it didn’t exactly attract attention as people honestly dressed weirdly, he would prefer to wear something more casual at times. He was lucky he at least wore lighter armor, as he could already imagine if he was a warrior walking around in full plate armor going to lessons – something he had seen dozens of times within the Order.

The set he was getting currently consisted of a pair of nice dress pants and a weird shirt. He called it weird because while it had buttons, it also didn’t have buttons. Whenever he closed a button, the cloth just melded together, while it stayed visible and open if he opened one. It was honestly odd.

Over that, he wore a weird mix of a trenchcoat and a normal cloak with a large motif of a snake on the back. He came to learn only those with a Blessing were allowed to even have this specific symbol on their clothes, and the tailor was visibly excited at being allowed to make such a piece of clothing.

His shoes were the biggest thing that needed changing, at least according to the tailor. Jake didn’t know why old scuffed leather boots weren’t in fashion, but they clearly didn’t sit well with the fancy elf. He looked like Jake was committing some cardinal sin just by wearing them, especially when Jake said he had originally planned to wear them to a social function.

The entire set wasn’t actually considered equipment, even if it was high quality. If he wanted to have it be made into actual equipment giving stats and such, he would have to pay extra as the items would need further energy infusion and crafting time.

By paying extra, Jake naturally meant having Villy pay extra. Not that Jake was poor, but more on that later.

He exited the shop looking pretty good, in his own opinion, even if he did have to discuss getting a hood added to go with the mask – yes, he would keep using the mask. The compromise they reached was the hood becoming able to meld into the rest of the neck of the coat. Jake still had no idea what kind of sorcery was going on, especially considering it wasn’t even considered equipment.

“The life as a sugar daddy is hard,” Villy sighed as they entered the street.

“Poor you,” Jake smirked. “I have to ask, are you planning on attending the party too?”

“Nah, that honestly sounds boring. While it may look like I enjoy fucking with people for my own entertainment, I only bother to mess with people I find entertaining to do so with. A bunch of random D-grades does not fall into that category,” Villy shook his head.

“Huh, not even that guy you gave a Divine Blessing? I assume you did have some interest in him,” Jake asked. He knew Divine Blessings were considered high-tier, so Jake would find it weird if Villy had just given it out willy-nilly.

“Not particularly, no. He is a good seed but is ultimately just one gamble of many. If he manages to reach A-grade or maybe S-grade, I probably will begin paying attention, but he isn’t worth my time as he is right now. Chances are he will die before I bother,” the god casually said.

“You say that talking to a mere D-grade,” Jake chuckled as the two of them reached a wall with a teleportation gateway on. They were scattered throughout the entire city and were honestly just so damn convenient.

“No, I am talking to a friend,” Villy answered. He did sigh and looked a bit more serious as they went through the gateway and appeared in Jake’s mansion.

“I am currently just running with the assumption you will become a god and thus immortal, and with that assumption in mind, treating the current you as immortal already makes sense, doesn’t it? And who’s got time to bother with mortals?”

“A bold assumption based on what you yourself said in the past about the chances anyone has of reaching godhood,” Jake shook his head. “Not that I necessarily disagree. Dying to old age certainly doesn’t seem like a possibility.”

“Exactly, and gods can die fighting too, so it’s the same thing, right? You are just a bit more fragile, that’s all,” the snake god laughed. “Speaking of being fragile, I have an appointment with Duskleaf, and he is gonna get mad if he finds out I split my attention between the two of you and didn’t fully assist his experiment...”

Jake looked at Villy with exaggerated surprise. “You actually have productive things to do? Also, how is Duskleaf fragile?”

“How is going shopping for new clothes not productive and imperative to running the Order of the Malefic Viper? No, let me rephrase that. How is making sure my Chosen presents himself the best he can not important? As for Duskleaf, well, his poor ego would suffer, so that counts as fragile.”

“Yeah yeah, now get going. I have to leave soon too, but need to make my gift first,” Jake said, waving his hand.

“Sure thing. See you around,” Villy said as he disappeared.

*Why did we bother using gates when he can just teleport us around casually?* Jake questioned as the god left.

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A few seconds passed before he saw a head peek out down the large entry hall, as Meira had finally dared come out, having no doubt been waiting for the Viper to leave.

“Hey Meira, did you get the ingredients I asked for?”

As she had seen the coast was clear, she came out and went up to Jake and summoned three glass boxes with herbs in each. “Yes! They were all widely available.”

Meira had summoned the items out of her spatial necklace, as, of course, Jake had gotten her one of those. Seeing her try and stuff items into a damn oversized satchel just got silly. She had protested a bit, to begin with, but Jake had insisted. Besides, he had found out he was loaded.

You see, not all Credits were created equal. Or, well, all Credits were besides for the Credits of the ninety-third universe. Jake could not have Credits transferred to him, but he could spend it. At the same time, the Credits from his universe apparently were incredibly valuable for those walking a merchant path due to opportunities given by the integration. Especially merchant gods. This meant that the Order offered the transfer of Credits to contribution points of AC at a way higher rate for those of the ninety-third Universe.

Jake’s Credits had roughly a 1-100 exchange rate compared with other types of Credits. Jake had found the rate a bit weird in that it was so straightforward, but Villy had told him the exchange rate was set by what was essentially a council of merchant gods or something to make sure competition didn’t go crazy. Yep, it appeared the entire multiversal financial industry was effectively run by an oligopoly of powerful gods.

The ingredients he had asked Meira to help him procure were for a very specific kind of poison that one just had to bring when invited to a social function within the Order. Anything else than bringing a good bottle of tasty poison would just be straight-up rude.

Jake went into his laboratory after swiftly changing out of his new clothes and back into his usual getup as he did some alchemy for the next one and a half hours. He had been mentally planning this poison since the moment he got the invitation, and he was already looking forward to the effects it would have. Of course, he didn’t try to make it lethal, but it surely wouldn’t be a good time if their Palate was lacking.

Once he was done, he quickly got on his dapper outfit and prepared himself to go. He went to the living room where Meira was already waiting as Jake flopped down on a couch. Jake sighed a bit as he looked up at the floor.

"Is anything the matter, Sir?" Meira asked.

"You know... I was the type to never want to go to the bar after a house party ended, but would rather just head home and chill... and as I sit here, I remember why," Jake said.

Meira went over and sat across from him, waiting for him to continue talking.

"I don't like it. I don't like these damn social events that you can't avoid getting into. I always feel out of place, like my presence is somehow contrary to what the event is all about. There are so many norms, spoken and unspoken, making it feel like an arena with poorly defined playing rules," Jake began venting out of the blue as Meira just sat there listening patiently.

"I began to understand why I always felt so out of place all the time only after the system arrived... well, one of the reasons anyway. You see, my Bloodline is quite peculiar... I am quite peculiar. I don't tend to deal well with rules in general, and reflecting back on everything before the system arrived, I understand that it wasn't just dealing with rules, but dealing with rules set by those I considered my lessers. Subconsciously, at least, I viewed them as such. Like I was surrounded by weaklings who told me how to behave. Of course, it wasn't like that, but that is another part of me. I tend to boil things down till they become simple to the point of oversimplification, even in too complex situations."

"Sir, if I may?" Meira finally asked.

"Yeah?" Jake asked, feeling a bit embarrassed at his ramblings.

"Norms and rules only apply to those it is applicable to. I do not know how the world worked before, but at least everywhere I have been, the norms and rules are decided by those with the power to do so. If you are strong enough, no one complains. So Sir shouldn't worry, but just act like himself, and if any such norms are broken by doing so... well, then Sir can just change the norm," Meira said encouragingly.

Jake listened to her words and smiled a bit. "You do make it sound simple. While I am sure people like the Viper can do that, I am not quite there yet unless I want to reveal my identity. I have no interest in leveraging that unless I have to."

"Sir is plenty strong on his own," Meira said assertedly.

He knew she didn't truly know how strong he was. She probably didn't even know his level, yet she seemed so convinced in her belief. It was a bit flattering, and Jake had to be honest, it did help cheer him up a little bit.

"Well, complaining won't change the fact that I am going," Jake ultimately just sighed. This was just like every time he had to go to a gathering before the system, where he

always considered just canceling last minute. Usually, he at least had Miranda to lean on and shield him, but here he would go alone. Reika was the only one he truly knew there, and he knew she had enough to deal with herself.

Meira shifted a bit in her seat, clearly still feeling his discomfort. "Sir, is there anything I can do to assist?"

That part of her had never changed. In fact, it had gotten worse. Meira always felt like in any situation where any issue existed, she had to be the one to fix it. If she could or not didn't matter as she would at least ask if there was anything she could do.

Taking Meira along to the party was obviously not an option. She was not from the ninety-third universe, and he was sure she would be even more out of place than himself. Jake wasn't a saint, but he sure wouldn't put her through that.

"Just your encouragement is good enough," Jake smiled at her as he finally got up. He stretched his back as he finally stopped delaying more than necessary and headed for the hall with the gateway circle on it.

Meira followed him, trying to be encouraging. When he looked at her, he honestly found his own social discomfort silly. She had to deal with being thrown into an entirely different world where she suddenly served the Chosen of the Malefic Viper with the god himself sometimes coming by. She had to deal with knowing Jake was both a heretic and a Chosen while also just learning how to deal with Jake as a person.

Jake could deal with a damn academy party if she could do that.

*Let's go,* Jake thought as he activated the gateway, and with a final "good luck!" from Meira, Jake went through.

He appeared in a massive hall already filled with people, and as Jake looked about, something quickly became clear. This wasn't just a party just for the new members of the ninety-third universe but something far more as he felt over a hundred C-grade auras scattered throughout the utterly humongous hall.

As he stood there, someone approached him, and Jake turned to see Irin. She wore a low-cut red dress that actually managed to cover more than her usual outfit, if barely.

"I am glad you could make it, and may I say, you are looking even better than usual," she said flirtatiously.

Jake regarded Irin and smiled beneath his mask as he returned her compliment.

"Thanks, you look great too. Now, this is quite a gathering, but can I ask you just one thing?" Jake asked.

He knew *exactly* what he needed.

“Where is the alcohol?”

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## **- Chapter 433: The Power of Booze**

### **Chapter 433: The Power of Booze**

Reika hadn't even considered if she should go to the social gathering or not. It was a natural choice, and she understood that this party was as much networking as it was an actual celebration of sorts. She had talked a lot with many of her fellow students and slowly integrated herself with some who had more talented and higher-rated comrades.

The reason why this meeting was held now and not earlier was due to many outside observers wanting to get an idea of the new students. They wanted to see how they performed in the first classes, what they showed talent in, and if some were worthy of picking up and cultivating.

That's right, this entire party was one big recruitment drive. Representatives of factions of the Order were present in droves, along with several auxiliary factions working with the Order. They were all talking with those from the ninety-third universe they found worth talking to.

There were also other new students present, but the representatives showed less interest in them. Reika knew that individuals from new universes had some special properties such as their Tongue of the Myriad Races, as well as apparently a boost in Records. Or, more accurately, a boost in that they were all Forerunners, automatically giving a good dose of Records right off the bat. This is what had allowed even the untalented and unmotivated back on Earth to get level 50 or so with little effort. Needless to say, this boost of Records was far from enough to be helpful in the long run, but it could be built upon with momentum. They lacked the boost of Records one got from powerful parents, but the ones from the new universe were considered better in many ways.

Then, of course, there was the fact many factions wanted a foothold in the new universe. It was something that was usually not that big of a priority in the early days for many factions, but this time it was different. Because according to the rumors, the Chosen of the Malefic One belonged to the new universe.

Jake's existence made it essential for them to establish themselves in hopes of probably assisting him in the early days. They would gladly do this if it meant getting in the good graces of the Malefic One and his Chosen, even if it took sacrifices and much work.

Now, talking about Jake. Reika did say she hadn't even considered if she should go before the event, but currently, she was seriously doubting her own decision-making skills. Reika herself had wanted to make allies. She knew that Jake was talented in areas she was not, but she was confident in her social skills after lots of practice in her younger days.

So how the hell had Jake turned out to get along so damn well with bloody everyone?

"Ya know, I just don't get it. Why does Palate make shit taste better?" Jake loudly complained as he swung a bottle around. "This one got literal shit in it!"

"It's from mushroom extra-"

"Literal. Shit," Jake interrupted some poor early D-grade who tried to correct him.

"True!" a scaled dragonkin beside him said. "I grew up eating that garbage every damn day; no way I am now drinking it!"

The scalekin was perhaps the most popular figure present, with Jake hiding his identity. It was the one who carried the Divine Blessing named Draskil, and he was currently bonding with Jake over their shared hate for mushrooms, even though Draskil seemed to despise moss more than fungi.

They were surrounded by a whole crowd of primarily scalekin who had all gathered when Jake and Draskil, for some god-forsaken reason, decided that throwing acid to test the other's scales was a funny side activity. To make it worse, both began laughing when Draskil's entire arm fell off from getting corroded through.

Then, for good measure, Jake did the same shit and poured acid over his own arm. It ended up still hanging on by a few centimeters of flesh as Jake celebrated loudly.

And yes, before anyone asked, they were both smashed. Reika had been afraid Jake would reveal something he shouldn't, but nothing like that had happened so far. Plenty of things Reika thought Jake should not do had happened, but it wasn't like she could tell him what to do...

Either way, it turned out that while Jake had not really made any connections with the more humanoid races, he was sure a hit among the more monstrous ones.

"Wait, you were scared of the sun?" Jake laughed as Draskil made his confession.



“All three of em!” the dragonkin responded with laughter. “You try and live underground and then suddenly get functional eyes and seek out the surface only to see three massive balls of fire! Down below fire usually meant lava, and lava meant you were about to get roasted!”

“Wait, I thought you were blind?” Jake asked. Molemen were blind, right? Jake was pretty sure of that.

“To light, not heat,” Draskil corrected as he took a huge chug of a bottle. Putting it down, he looked straight at Jake. “Why the mask?”

“Loot from probably the strongest foe I’ve ever fought,” Jake responded in a serious tone.

“Hm, a treant of sorts?” the dragonkin asked with interest.

“Something far more powerful than that,” Jake smirked below his mask. Even while pretty smashed, his brain still worked well enough to not share stuff like that.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Draskil shrugged as he raised his bottle again. “Cheers to powerful foes and the bounty from their kills!”

“Cheers!” Jake and dozens of scalekin all around them said as they drank.

Honestly, Draskil was a pretty cool dude. He could also hold his alcohol quite well, and Jake felt happy he had finally found a match.

Draskil had originally struck Jake as the silent type, but he had quickly come to learn it wasn’t quite like that. Draskil and Jake were very similar in that they both didn’t really like large social settings. Jake due to how he was, and Draskil due to the way he had lived his life so far as a solitary survivor. Molemen were a nomadic race that lived underground and had to always travel for food. They had been far more intelligent than any animal on Earth besides humans but were still not at the level of men. Perhaps at the level of ten to eleven-year-olds. The source of this content is *novel\*\*fire\*\*net*

The now-dragonkin had been a bit special in that he had been smarter than his brethren. This meant he had been shunned and had to survive on his own for his entire life. He had to scour for food himself and eventually even began looting caravans of his brethren to survive. His experience had allowed him to prevail right off the bat during the Tutorial and get to where he was today.

Jake was a bit surprised at how loose Draskil’s tongue was after getting a few drinks in but soon realized he had just finally loosened up. He wasn’t the type to care about secrets, even if he was clearly a prideful man. Draskil had only spoken to a handful so far, and with Jake the most, as the dragonkin had more or less confessed that he only

viewed Jake as a proper equal because he, to quote: “feel it in my bones you are strong.”

On the note of alcohol, Palate worked weird with it. It eliminated some parts of it while it allowed other parts to function. This meant Jake was drunk; he knew that. But he also knew he was drunk, and his thought process and mind were only semi-affected. That is why he could be both clear-headed and feel the joy of alcohol at the same time, almost like he could switch back and forth at will. He was sure he could reach a level of intoxication where that was no longer the case – a few passed out scalekin sitting slumped in chairs proving this – but so far, Jake was far off that.

What did consistently work was Jake feeling way calmer and soothed overall. Also, he didn't know why, but he really jelled with these scalekin as they all drank and celebrated. Jake knew they were there for Draskil to begin with, but eventually, Jake became included.

He did also do some politics after he found out it was a political party thing. He got a bunch of contact numbers, including those of several brewers who had helped supply alcohol to the party. Yes, that counted as valuable networking too.

Anyway, around four hours had passed since Jake arrived, and finally, it seemed like everyone had come. People were delayed due to them having lessons or other engagements to handle first. With that, it seemed like the host would finally make their appearance.

“A belated welcome to everyone!” Jake suddenly heard a voice ring out, getting the attention of everyone. In the middle of the hall, on a podium of newly-raised stone, stood the elf and human pair Jake had seen on the first day he went to the Academy.

**[Human – lvl 161]**

**[Elf – lvl 167]**

The human had gained two levels and elf one. The elf was a woman who looked a bit like Meira but had long red hair, while the human had a strong build and generally what Jake guessed would be described as “heroic” features. They looked like a couple out of some fantasy game or movie, and it turned out they were.

“At the request of many of the wonderful sponsors of this gathering and influential factions within the Order, we are holding this get-together to not only get to bond with one another but to make new friends among those already established in this universe,” the human began.

“Allow me to first introduce myself. I am King Aiborn of the Twinsoul Kingdom, and beside me is my wife, Queen Eilenria. As many likely can guess, we come from a planet

where elves and humans have lived in co-existence for centuries already, and we are more than happy to see the Order also be like that.”

Jake was already beginning to feel bored as he looked at Draskil, who also just grinned and shook his head. Who cared if they were kings and queens or whatever? He was pretty damn sure they didn’t have the nobility titles from the system, that is for sure.

“With the advent of change, both for us as individuals, as well as our universe, I hope that today can be the foundation of a strong working relationship for the future. For not only our own factions back home, but the Order and those we ally with to get footholds within the new frontier that is our world!”

He said it all with much fervor, and Jake did see some be touched. He also clearly felt the human had some hefty social skills bordering on mental manipulation. Not that anyone minded, not even Jake. There seemed to be a general agreement that if you were weak enough to get influenced, good riddance.

The next to speak up was the elf queen lady, who also clearly possessed some potent leadership skills. Even better than the humans.

“The Twinsoul Kingdom has already made partnerships, and we are certain there is power in numbers. Not a single force in this room will stand a chance in the ninety-third universe against powerful factions like the Holy Church, Altmar Empire, Valhal, or any other large faction I am certain have already begun planting their roots. The ectognamorphs have already begun their conquests, the Starborne empires made preparations, and the Endless Steppe armies banded together... even the demon empires and automaton stand ready to grasp this new unconquered territory. Not a single faction is not interested in claiming their own piece of the pie.

“That is why it is imperative that we each at least secure our own planets. To do that, you will need allies, and as our universe opens up gradually, we will become able to rely on these allies more and more. So please, I plead to all of you. For the sake of the Order and our own futures in the ninety-third universe, let today, before the Second World Congress, be the day we all stand side by side!”

Jake just sat back and listened to the impassioned speech, and while he was certain a few were moved, he was most certainly not. Her flowery words were nice enough, but it was clear they wanted to make themselves and their own little kingdom a center point of this new alliance of sorts.

He also saw a small group of Risen standing by themselves, all sneering a bit. Among them were two C-grades and all of the students who had arrived from the ninety-third universe. They were naturally looking down at this entire display, and Jake had also noted the lack of mention of the entire Risen faction.

As Jake had already come to learn with the whole Emberflight debacle, then the Order didn't truly function as a traditional faction for the vast majority of members. More an overall alliance of different factions who all worked with or for the Order or were subservient to it. This did mean one could be part of the Order and the Altmar Empire or many other factions. One didn't even need to view the Viper as the greatest of all the gods – just one of the greatest.

This philosophy did have some factions it didn't jell with. The Holy Church was an exclusive faction, the Court of Shadows was one, and so were many other ones in the multiverse. High-ranking members of pretty much any faction would also only exclusively belong to that one faction.

Jake was certain the Order worked as it did due to Villy's entire philosophy on freedom. How it was the most important thing to have agency and control your own path, so of course, he didn't bother to have a faction that locked people in, at least not as a requirement.

The Order did have core members. These were the members of the different Halls, of which there was only one currently. This is where one found the true believers of the Malefic Viper and the individuals who had pledged their lives to the Order. They were the leading faction within the Order and had the backing of Villy himself, though, in reality, it had been Snappy fulfilling that role for the longest time.

Draskil, who sat with Jake, also didn't bother with the human and elf much besides the basic level courtesy of not interrupting. From their earlier conversation, Draskil was already dedicated to the Order and had no interest in joining any other faction, no matter what.

By now, most knew this, but there were still the occasional hopeful. The queen and king pair kept talking a bit more about the power of unity and the importance of conquering through the World Congress before spreading out and making allies. They first greeted and talked with those who went up to them, but soon enough, they set their sights on where Jake and Draskil were sitting drinking together.

For the third time in a short while, the dragonkin and human exchanged a glance as they knew what was coming. The elf and human pair were even joined by a few representatives from different factions. Most of them lower-rung ones who no-doubt wanted some of that Divine Blessing clout.

*Oh boy, here we go again,* Jake thought as he and Draskil shared another drink before more political bullshit arrived.

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

## Chapter 434: Outed

Ah, politics. Jake hated doing it with a passion which is why he always outsourced it whenever possible. He hadn't liked it before the system either. He wasn't talking about the large political things like elections and such, but the small political maneuvering everyone did in their daily lives.

One example was making friends with certain other employees for their positions and then leveraging that friendship whenever needed. Jake knew it was almost expected that managers made friends with certain people in the HR department, so they had an ally to back them up on most issues.

People also did this with their bosses. In fact, the best example was how everyone was always way nicer to their boss than any other "equal" employee. How if the boss didn't like anyone, everyone else also ostracized that employee to stay in the good graces of their glorious leader. Anyone who chose to show sympathy would naturally fall into the same camp as the pariah and be shunned themselves.

Jake had always hated this with a passion. Ass-lickers and sycophants who he didn't doubt would throw their own mother under a bus for a promotion and a pat on the back from boss almighty. He knew their look, and as he saw the approaching crowd, he recognized it all too well.

Many plans were being formed in his mind on how to handle them. On the one hand, he knew offending them could lead to trouble down the road, not just for him but Miranda and others too, but on the other hand, he really didn't wanna deal with them but set a hard line in the sand.

Luckily for him, Draskil didn't have any of Jake's reservations.

"The fuck you two want?" he aggressively asked the collection of humans, elves, and a few beastkin who went over.

"I apologize, Lord Draskil. We did not mean to disturb you. We merely meant to ask if we could borrow Lord Hunter for a minute to discu-"

"No, fuck off, we're busy," Draskil sneered as he stared them down. Jake just kept his mouth shut, and when they looked at him, he just shrugged powerlessly while inwardly wanting to give the dragonkin a high-five.

"Please, I promise to be brief," the human insisted again, but Draskil was having none of it.

“Are you blind? We are drinking, so if you want to talk, grab a drink and sit down or leave us be.”

Well, okay, that wasn't exactly what Jake had planned, but he guessed it would be an okay compromise. Also, he needed an opportunity to give his gift, so maybe it would work out? His only problem was that he hadn't really seen anyone give anything either – besides the boot-lickers – so he wasn't really sure if he even wanted to.

The human and elf pair exchanged a glance before eventually moving to sit down. However, behind them, an early C-grade elf suddenly stopped them by raising his hand.

“Young man, showing courtesy is a virtue. There is no need for such an attitude, and you would do well to correct it,” the elf said, not to Jake but Draskil.

The dragonkin stood up and stared at the C-grade dead in the eye. “And you would do well to know when you are out of your league.”

An aura descended as Draskil let his presence loose, and Jake had to raise an eyebrow and keep himself calm. He clenched his fists a bit as his instincts made it clear... Draskil had gotten stronger. If Jake saw him as only slightly stronger when they entered the Order, he was now far more powerful... and he even had a feeling that initial evaluations had been slightly off.

*“Oh yeah... I guess I never told you,” he suddenly heard Villy's voice. “The dragonkin killed his version of Snappy, and he isn't really an alchemist at all. He is just a being of pure slaughter.”*

Jake didn't react outwardly, but inwardly he processed the information. Draskil beating his version of Snappy meant he killed one at level 190, 30 levels above the one Jake fought. Even if Jake believed he would have a chance now against the 160 one, he knew he would be utterly outclassed against one at level 190.

And Jake was also very sure that a level 190 Snappy would have been able to utterly destroy most early C-grades... especially if they were someone clearly not combat-focused like the C-grade attendant that had come with the human and elf.

Killing intent mixed with an odd feeling of emptiness rolled across the hall from Draskil as he towered over the elf who had seemed so confident before. However, the moment Draskil released his power, the elf clearly realized he had fucked up.

“Please do not misunderstand; I merely meant tha-”

A claw flew out and grasped the C-grade by the face before he could react. The moment he did so, Jake felt another presence appear that had been observing them from the start as a scaled figure teleported into his sphere.

Draskil looked over at the newcomer and let go of the stupid attendant who fell to the floor with blood running down his face from the claws digging in. The scaled figure saw this, nodded, and was gone as quickly as he appeared.

It appeared that even Draskil would back down when a random A-grade pops in.

However, even then, Draskil had established himself as the dominant party. Jake got up and put a hand on Draskil's shoulder. "Chill and sit down. Ignore the morons of the world."

Draskil turned his head and looked at Jake before just smirking and sitting back down casually like nothing had ever happened. Jake followed suit, but not before telling the elf and human pair: "I have no interest in aligning myself with any faction. Oh, and trust me, the competition you would have to beat if I was interested isn't in your league. As for your whole idea of an alliance, I shall let time decide if that ever becomes a necessity. However, as things are back on my homeworld, things are a bit too complicated for the likes of you two to get involved."

The two of them looked at him briefly before nodding in understanding before turning to leave again. The C-grade representative also left in embarrassment as Jake sat his ass back down and turned to Draskil.

"See, that is how rejection is gracefully done," Jake scolded the brute dragonkin.

"Words when actions are more effective," Draskil just shook his head.

Jake just smirked as he held out his hand towards a bottle of beer on the table and spoke: "**Come.**"

The bottle moved on its own as it flew into Jake's hand. Jake was still far too weak to use Words of Power for anything useful in combat, but it was still a fun technique. "Behold, the power of words."

"Words of Power," Draskil corrected.

"And Words of Power is the power of words," Jake countered.

The two of them chuckled a bit as they each enjoyed their drinks. Jake finally decided to ask something he now wondered about after seeing the display against the C-grade:

"You killed any C-grades yet?"

Draskil looked at Jake as he raised an eyebrow. "Plenty."

"At what level were you when you killed your first?" Jake further asked.



“173 or 174. Why?” Draskil asked a bit suspiciously.

“Just curious. Relax, I am not looking for a dick-measuring contest,” Jake laughed it off.

“Why would the size of one’s genitalia matter when killing?” Draskil asked with genuine confusion.

Jake just shook his head in response. “Not going to explain that one to you.”

Mainly because he couldn’t. Who had even come up with such a stupid saying and concept anyway?

Poor Draskil looked confused for a few moments before just shrugging it off as he kept drinking. The two of them relaxed a bit more and just talked about good fights they had in the past, and Jake came to learn that he and Draskil both had in common that they were sole survivors of their Tutorials, though for different reasons.

In Jake’s, everyone had been officially “killed,” and it was a shitshow while Draskil had killed everyone else in his Tutorial. One thing was for sure, Draskil was not a kindhearted dragonkin, and his path so far had been one where he killed most others who got in his way. He did own a Pylon and had a position similar to Jake’s, but he apparently had to go through three City Lords so far before he got one who didn’t get ambitious or tried to backstab him. Jake had really gotten lucky with Miranda now that he thought about it.

As they talked, more people kept arriving at the gathering, and political maneuvering was ongoing all around. They just had their own corner where they chilled with other scalekin who sometimes joined in, and Jake learned a lot about the different kinds of scalekins – a race far more diverse than humans.

This kept on until Jake felt a familiar presence approach. Two of them, in fact. One was Irin, but she looked a bit nervous as she walked beside another figure Jake had met with not that long ago. The dragonkin Helen had also decided to pay a visit.

Jake glanced at Draskil to see if he would toss them away again, but he just stared at their approach. He seemed almost transfixed and was still just staring when they made it over and greeted them.

“Lord Hunter, Lord Draskil, I have brought Lady Helenstromoz Emberflight, who decided to grace this lowly event with her presence,” Irin said. Jake at first thought it was done sarcastically, but she was one hundred percent sincere. The dragon lady had some social standing, that was for sure.

“We meet again,” Jake just greeted her with a nod.

“Indeed we do, Patriarch Hunter,” she greeted him with a meaningful smile.

Jake's smile instantly faded as she had spoken loud enough for Draskil and Irin as well as several scalekin to hear. Irin looked at Jake with surprise, and Draskil looked bewildered for a moment before it also clicked in his head.

Calling out his Bloodline like that was honestly a bit of a dick move.

He looked at her as he shook his head. "A bit petty, isn't it? Just because I rejected you once you come to cause trouble like a little girl who didn't get what she wanted the first time around?"

It was entirely possible she wanted to keep up a façade of ignorance, grace, and civility, but Jake didn't. He knew his Bloodline would be shared eventually, but to openly out him like this just wasn't okay and wasn't going to fly.

Helen frowned a bit at Jake's word but chose to act ignorant as predicted. "I am uncertain what you mean? If I remember correctly, our last meeting ended with you taking time to think about the offer."

"You got a Bloodline?" Draskil butted in before Jake could answer Helen.

"Yep," Jake quickly answered him before turning back to Helen. "And that thinking period is now over. I honestly liked the straightforward approach the first time around, but this manipulative bullshit isn't acceptable."

Helen looked a bit surprised at Jake's outright refusal and attitude. She stared at him in disbelief for a moment and decided to leave. "Very well, I can see I engaged you at a bad time, and you seem to have had a bit too much to drink. Let us have this discussion in a more private setting the next time? We could even go to the local Emberflight Sanctum to—"

"I think I made my answer clear?" Jake asked.

"I shall choose to allow you to keep considering the offer," Helen just said as she promptly turned and teleported away as she turned into flames and disappeared through a gate.

*Did she just run away to get the last word? Now that is petty,* Jake scoffed internally as he shook his head and took another drink of his beer.

Irin and Draskil both stared at him a bit towards the direction Helen had gone.

"Uhm, Lord Hunter..." Irin began. "Do you know who the young mistress is?"

Jake shrugged. "A little girl with personality issues because daddy gave her everything she wanted growing up?"

Draskil chuckled a bit as Irin looked grave. "She is the young mistress of the Emberflight Clan, born with a unique and very powerful Bloodline. She is already being nurtured by several S-grades, with even some gods paying attention... offending her and making an enemy of a Dragonflight isn't wise. I would try to mend the relationship if possible."

"While I appreciate the advice and understand it comes from a place of concern, it is unnecessary," Jake answered.

"Did that lass want to have your hatchlings?" Draskil suddenly just asked out of the blue.

Jake and Irin were both taken aback, as Draskil looked like the question was completely innocent. Jake wasn't sure what to say but chose to just be honest. "There indeed were talks of "procuring" my Bloodline, and that she would be involved isn't out of the question. But I have no interest at all, not with her or anyone."

"A shame; she looks very breedable," Draskil shrugged. "But seeing as you aren't going for her, can I? She looks like she would give powerful hatchlings. Don't worry, wouldn't go for it if you had already claimed her as your mate."

Jake looked at Draskil for a moment as he decided then and there to never talk relationships with the guy. "No comments."

"Great," he smiled, but it quickly turned to a frown. "Not that I know how to contact her."

He then looked towards Irin, who shook her head. "I do not have any way of contacting her. I only met her just now as she arrived at the venue."

Before Draskil even looked at Jake, Jake answered. "This is your issue to deal with, buddy."

While Jake didn't care about Helen, he wasn't going to just give out the contact information of others without consent, no matter how little he liked them. Besides, he now knew he had a whole other problem to deal with as Irin finally returned her attention to him.

"So... a Bloodline?"

"It is what it is," Jake shrugged. Read full story at *novel•fire•net*

"A beneficial one too based on the actions of the Emberflight."

Jake knew he didn't need to answer as the actions of Helen had all but confirmed it. He also knew denying he had a Bloodline would be a waste of time as someone present was bound to report it to some superiors or backers or something who could send someone to check. Instead, he decided to just own up to it and go with the old illusion of it being a presence-based one.

Through his Sphere of Perception, he had already seen several individuals take out their tokens after Helen had arrived and outed him. Many reports had already been sent out, and Jake knew that before long, the existence of his Bloodline and the fact that the Emberflight deemed it valuable would be spread far and wide.

*I need some more beer...*

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## Book 2 of now out on Amazon + Coins.

Big hype day! **Book 2 of is now out on Kindle Unlimited and Audible**, once more narrated by Travis Baldree. Book two will include some extra stuff that was not on the RR release, such as two side stories that were actually originally intended to be part of the main story, but back then, the hatred for anything non-Jake made me turn them into Patreon-exclusive side stories. However, as I read through things and prepared book 2, I decided it was best to include them and turn them into intermissions. One of them is about when Villy first returns to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and the other is about what happened to Casper after he left the Tutorial till he returned to Earth. So yeah, very canon and very relevant stuff.

Additionally, there will also be / is currently an ongoing AMA on R/Progressionfantasy on Reddit later today, or maybe it is already ongoing, so go check it out over there. I hope to answer all questions asked... if I find them worth answering. This AMA will also include a giveaway of some metal coins I had made together with my publisher, so be sure to at least give it a look. Here are the coins (I am quite happy about them):

And the other side:

A number of these coins will be given away during the AMA, but they can also be ordered **HERE**. Finally, book 1 is also on sale for less than a dollar right now, and if you want to be a bit fancier, I even got a hardcover release for book 1 - also on Amazon.

As always, any support of the release is highly appreciated. Updates are released by *novel·fire·net*

Thanks in advance everyone and have a good one!

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## Chapter 435: Political Maneuvering & Preparations

Jake couldn't help but reflect on what exactly Helen and the Emberflight Clan tried to accomplish by outing him. It was clearly a tactic of theirs, and Jake seriously doubted it was something the young mistress had suddenly decided on doing herself. It was deliberate and with a goal.

Irin decided to stick around Jake and Draskil, so he asked her some roundabout questions to get an idea, and he came to a rather quick understanding. In fact, Irin straight-up told him that he would probably be smart to make sure he had some kind of backing after today. Not to avoid getting kidnapped or some other stuff, but for anyone to want to back him.

When Jake said he already had a backer, Irin nodded in understanding and said: "Being pieces in the games of the powerhouses is never fun."

Jake had taken a bit to understand, but it soon clicked... the Emberflight hadn't done what they did today to get a response out of Jake; they wanted one out of his backer.

They were running with the assumption Jake had a powerful backer behind him, and that backer had to have influence over Jake, right? Helen showing up to a public meeting with several representatives from factions also clearly communicated the Emberflight Clan were interested in Jake, which would lead to two potential outcomes.

If a stronger faction became aware of Jake through the actions of the Emberflight, it would only reflect well on them. They would lose nothing besides recruiting Jake, something they maybe didn't view as that high of a priority or as having that high of a probability. Or, maybe they just didn't think a more powerful faction would bother.

The weaker factions would back off to not offend the Dragonflight or potentially harm a future working relationship. Jake had gathered that the Emberflight truly was considered a top-tier faction of the multiverse. They were not a peak-tier such as the Holy Church, Court of Shadows, or Altmar Empire, but were still not someone easily offended by any but the biggest of players.

They had just made one miscalculation... the Order of the Malefic Viper was considered a peak faction. The power of a faction was not decided by their size or area of influence but by their power. More accurately, the power of the god at its helm.

Now, if he thought about it, they had clearly never considered it possible the Malefic Viper was his backer. That made sense as that was so astronomically unlikely, so what they probably believed was that Jake had a powerful S-grade master who was a

member of the Order. Either a true member part of a Hall or a normal member, but either way, this backer or master would no-doubt view Jake as a way to get in the good graces of another faction. Why else would an S-grade bother with a weak D-grade whose biggest redeeming feature was his Bloodline?

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The backer would be made to choose, and the Emberflight were confident. Of course, not choosing would be an issue too. It would result in Jake being hounded until he made his position clear, and the backer would also find himself revealed soon enough and be pressured himself. Perhaps not directly, but indirectly. Moreover, this backer would get nothing out of Jake if he didn't become part of a larger faction.

All of this boiled down to the basic assumption that Jake was nothing more than a chess piece in the game of powerful experts. A chess piece holding a valuable commodity to be traded away sooner or later, with the backer being the primary decider of how this would be done. This was naturally completely wrong, but if that is what they believed, the Emberflight Clan's actions made a bit more sense. They never considered if offending Jake mattered or not, and even if they offended his backer, it would just be a measly S-grade.

Irin's initial interpretation of the situation seemed to be identical to Jake's, and she even admitted something as they spoke.

"I will be honest, my clan was interested in potentially recruiting you as an auxiliary member even before the Bloodline. Just due to the fact you had a Blessing, we believed it worth it. Now, with a Bloodline and a Dragonflight showing interest, I firmly believe they will back off. Our Matriarch is only A-grade, so offending the Emberflight Clan simply isn't something we can afford."

Draskil had just shrugged as his input boiled down to not caring about factions at all besides the Order of the Malefic Viper. The guy really looked up to Villy and was a true believer.

So... to summarize, the Emberflight Clan believed that what they had done today would put pressure on Jake and his backer to decide on a faction to join. As the backer would pick the faction that could offer the most, the Emberflight naturally assumed they were a popular choice.

Too bad for them. They were as wrong as can be, and Jake decided to stay away from any factions for now. Did he have the choice of joining the Order of the Malefic Viper for real in one of the Halls? Sure, but he also had the choice of just going "Oh, by the way, Chosen of the Viper right here," to get everyone off his back. If he said that, Jake would be viewed as not only a true member of the Order but the most important member besides a few people.

"Villy, any thoughts?" Jake asked after reaching his own conclusion.

"On what?" the god answered promptly.

*"You know, the Emberflight putting pressure on me, my Bloodline being public knowledge within a few days, and the issues that are to follow?"* he asked, knowing full well the Viper knew all this.

*"Oh. That. Seems like a you-problem last time I checked,"* Villy said cheekily.

*"So you would be fine with me revealing my identity as your Chosen and using that to make everyone back off and be treated like the second coming of you?"*

*"Jake, Jake, Jake. I was always fine with that. I wanted to help you hide your identity for your own sake, not mine. I picked you as my Chosen, and of course, I stand by that choice. One day it will be revealed no matter what, and when you choose to do so is up to you and you alone. You can invoke my name whenever you feel like it, as long as you want to deal with what it will bring. I will support you far more openly if you choose this, not that I think it will be needed or even wanted,"* Villy explained, getting a bit more serious.

Jake was silent for a bit. *"So, just for advice then, any way to get around this entire Bloodline thing without revealing myself as your Chosen and not joining a faction outright?"*

*"Plenty of ways. All for you to discover yourself,"* the god answered as his presence slowly faded away.

This left Jake sitting with his own thoughts as he thought of a solution. Because damn, did he need one. He felt hundreds of gazes upon him at nearly all times from attendants all-around, as well as other students who looked like they *really* wanted to go up and talk to him.

Right now, he had Draskil as a shield as the dragonkin had shown himself to be less than approachable. He tolerated the presence of the scalekin groupies and Irin, but Jake knew that protection would only last for this party, so for now, he just leaned back and enjoyed his drink.

Irin still seemed genuinely concerned and continued to talk to Jake until he shot the topic down and told her to relax. He didn't know why she cared, but he did appreciate her advice that may even go against the interest of her clan.

With the matter shelved, the rest of the party went by as Jake just sat back and drank with his new dragonkin buddy and Irin, who decided to stick around throughout the entire day. Politics went on all around them, but they managed to make their small oasis of relaxation where the word "World Congress" wasn't mentioned at least every second sentence.



Not that Jake had forgotten. In only a few hours, it would be World Congress time.

Jacob sat at the high seat of the massively expanded conference room. Golden projections of men and women lined the seats all around the room, all of them nobles of different kinds, with many of them being City Lords.

By now, the Holy Church controlled close to a hundred Pylons of Civilization. They had more people within their territories than any other faction on the planet, and their strength had only consolidated and grown. Yet they knew they still faced many challenges on Earth.

The Great Famine, as the crisis was dubbed, had been a major setback. No one knew what had been the cause of the event either, and Jacob had tried to use his divination skills to find the cause but always came up blank. This made him believe it was somehow system-imposed.

Certain members of the Church came forward who specialized in curses and said they felt a powerful pulse of curse energy that day. The Church had looked into it, but it didn't appear the Risen had done anything as Casper was naturally the first suspect when it came to anything curse-related.

In the end, they quickly shut down all theories that this event was man-made or even caused by any being on Earth. The power involved, if it truly was caused by an individual, would be very concerning. That is why they had officially stated it was system-caused, the same as most other factions.

Because the alternative would only cause panic.

Jacob shook his head as finally all the seats were filled. This would be the last meeting before the World Congress and had all of the people present who would attend.

The Augur stood up as he regarded them all with a bright smile.

"Welcome to the assembly where we will discuss the Holy Church's approach in the Second World Congress."

A congress Jacob firmly believed they would gain more influence in than any other faction.

--

Miyamoto stood covered in sweat as he swung his blade again and again. The pressure upon him was unlike anything a human could normally survive, but he persisted as the nearly twenty mages all around him focused on the formation beneath his feet.

Soon enough, they ran out of mana as the pressure disappeared, and an attendant walked up to him with a towel.

"Thank you," he said as he wiped his face clean. The rest of the sweat turned into droplets that floated off his body and formed a small bubble of water that rapidly evaporated.

"Patriarch, are you ready to meet the ministers?" another attendant came and asked. Several more also entered to help the mages out of the courtyard to recover.

"Lead the way," Miyamoto smiled as he got handed a robe to cover his bare upper body. As he walked, a certain vampire also appeared and walked beside him. "It will be interesting to see what this World Congress is all about."

The former Monarch of Blood, Iskar, was a constant companion for Miyamoto and seemed especially interested in the political side of things. Far more so than the Sword Saint had ever thought. His vast knowledge had helped in places nobody in the Noboru clan had ever expected, and by now, Iskar was beginning to hold some influence.

He also helped by training those who had chosen to become vampires. It wasn't many so far, but a few hundred who felt stuck in their paths or simply hadn't found a place they felt they belonged had chosen to embrace vampirism. The clan had a stringent screening process, and far from everyone were allowed to choose this path.

"The World Congress always comes as an impetus of change for our small planet, so I too hold interest in what it will bring," Miyamoto simply said to the vampire. The two entered a large meeting hall with all those present from the Miyamoto Clan who would attend. They had shown up either in person or communicated from afar, some only using voice due to the distance.

The Noboru Clan were ready for whatever was to come, and with their expansion, the Sword Saint believed they should now be the second-largest faction after the Holy Church.

Valhal, the Court of Shadows, the Risen, Haven, and a plethora of other factions made their preparations for the upcoming World Congress. This time they knew what to expect and were far more ready than the last time. Plans and strategies were made, and new forces would participate that had never been there before. Alliances had been struck between factions all across the planet.

Arthur, Jacob's father, and the leader of a large alliance, was one such force no one knew how powerful it truly was. In pure numbers, perhaps their alliance could even match the Holy Church, while they had many experts who before never worked with others but chose to stay independent.

Eron, who none knew what was truly up to, prepared too, as even he understood the importance of the World Congress.

Every single force on Earth, small or large, prepared. Near-anyone who had gotten the invitation planned to attend, and they all were ready.

Unknowing that there was one more faction. One that no one but a single person on Earth was even aware of. And it was questionable if even he had predicted what was to happen.

The mountain range spanned into the horizon as winged beasts patrolled the area. To one side were infinite mountains, the other the endless ocean. Monsters of legends and myths were gathered towards a certain mountaintop as even the oceanic creatures made their appearance to show respect.

Powerful beast lords, creatures no human on Earth would feel confident challenging all gathered towards a certain mountain as on the top stood a structure of what looked like golden wood. A testament to the monster that lived there and one whom they all feared.

On Earth, beasts had fought for territory, and this area was one of the most sought-after. It led into the human lands while still connecting to the ocean and was part of the area C-grades were allowed to roam freely at the current time.

A land of death for most humans... yet on the mountain, several buildings were made. A small city was under construction in the valley below with no beasts harassing the humans working away. Occasionally a human would look towards the peak above with the golden temple and be in awe at the Lord who lived up there... no, the King.

System notifications were not a new thing. Quests were not new, but this was indeed a first. With an ivory claw, the Unique Lifeform waved his hand as the door was opened, and he stared out over the land that was his.

Behind him stood two humans who were to assist in this "World Congress" that was to come.

The Fallen King had to admit, it did indeed seem interesting.

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## Chapter 436: Presence of a King

Jake returned to his mansion half an hour before the World Congress to do some last-second preparations. He already had a talk with Miranda using her communication skill and agreed on a few minor things.

Contrary to the first time where Jake barely made it, he didn't rush this time. He took a shower after the party and sobered up as he smiled at remembering it. Draskil and he had been drinking until Jake had to leave, at which point Draskil also couldn't be arsed to stay any longer.

Meira was at a lesson still, so Jake just sat in the living room in meditation until the system notification appeared. He accepted it instantly as his vision went black, and he was teleported to who-knows-where – the location of the Congress.

Jake opened his eyes as he found himself in a familiar room. At least somewhat familiar as it had now expanded significantly. People teleported in all around him, and in only a few seconds, it was clear that far more than the hundred or so cities would be present this time around.

Miranda popped in right next to Jake, with Lillian and Neil following soon after.

“Hey guys and gals,” Jake greeted them with a smile. Not that they could see it, Jake would be mask-on for this Congress, just like the last one.

“New outfit?” Miranda asked, looking him over.

Jake was still wearing the party clothes as it seemed more fitting for this kind of event than his combat-getup. “Yep, what do you think?”

“Looks good, even if the snake motif is a bit on the nose and really advertising you are related to the Order of the Malefic Viper. Not that doing so is a bad thing,” she answered with a smile. “And good to see you again. I gather it goes well at the Order?”

“Eh, it's a bit so-and-so. Lots of annoying political stuff, same as everywhere, but I made some new friends and am learning a lot. You should come by at some time,” Jake said.

“I honestly have no need to. I am being taught using my Dreams of the Verdant Lagoon skill every chance I get, which I would argue is more effective in many ways due to the time dilation,” Miranda explained. “Even if I can't do anything there besides talk, at my current level of knowledge, that is what I need most. I don't doubt I will go in the future, but the time isn't right yet.”

Jake nodded in understanding, and before he could check in with Lillian and Neil, the system notification appeared.

**Welcome to the Second World Congress of Earth.**

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

**During the Second World Congress, two votes will be held with one four-hour intermission between each to discuss the proposal, after which a vote will be held. The total length of the World Congress will be six hours.**

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

For a moment, Jake thought it was identical to the message they got during the First World Congress, but he quickly noted three small differences. The first was the number of total votes only being two, which also decreased the duration of the event, and the disclaimer of sorts about those with the nobility rank of King not getting it upgraded.

Jake wondered why this was relevant for a moment as he looked across the room. He saw Jacob, Caleb, Casper, Priscilla, the Sword Saint, Carmen, Eron, and everyone else he knew appear on their respective platforms. He even saw Arthur appear on a lower-ranked platform.

Overall, Jake counted perhaps three thousand total booths, which meant three thousand claimed Pylons. Their planet had truly expanded in this time, and it was entirely possible many Pylons had been claimed with the owners not participating. However, one thing was off. Jake was not the only one to notice it either, as Jacob also looked confused when he saw the layout of the room.

The elevation of the platforms was decided based on who was on it, based on their nobility rank. Jake himself stood higher than everyone else, even if he did see some had managed to upgrade their nobility ranks above that of Lord in the lower rungs.

However... there was one platform that was above all others. Larger than all others. All attention was gathered on it as suddenly an aura appeared on top of it. A golden wave swept through the entire hall as Jake felt himself subtly be suppressed in power.

A figure rose as Jake felt his mask faintly resonate with the being that had appeared. Jake was surprised and instantly used Identify at willow figure of the former King of the Forest, who had somehow shown up in the World Congress.

**[Fallen King – lvl 191]**

Jake's eyes opened wide, and he instantly felt the mood of the room shift. If during the First World Congress, it had been Jake who suppressed all others and set the mood, then it was clear the King would do that this time.

He instantly also got another thought as he checked the voting rules of the World Congress.

### **Voting rules of the World Congress:**

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

**King: 1000**

**Prince: 250**

**Duke: 100**

**Marquiss: 25**

**Earl: 10**

**Viscount: 5**

**Baron: 3**

**Lord: 1**

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

*Well, fuck,* Jake thought as he saw the massive number of votes the King had available. It was honestly insane, and Jake felt like something was entirely wrong and unbalanced. Jake had talked to the King and knew he had the nobility title, but this wasn't what he had expected.

The entire hall was silent, just staring up at the King. He guessed many were faster than him at checking the voting rules and seeing that the situation truly wasn't what anyone had expected. The carefully laid plans of all factions, including the ones he and Miranda had made, were instantly made null due to the appearance of one Unique Lifeform.

*"Introductions are in order,"* the voice of the King echoed out in Jake's mind, and no doubt everyone else's too. *"I am known as the Fallen King, a Unique Lifeform born in*

*another world, brought here by certain circumstances. I believe this saying would be considered cliché, but I come in peace."*

Jake was a bit surprised at the King not instantly proclaiming himself the superior being and telling them all to bow in reverence, but instead acting... reasonable? What the hell was he planning?

"Fallen King..." Jacob muttered aloud. "You being here should not be possible."

*"Augur, what else but the impossible is expected of a being such as I?"* the King answered, making Jake feel a bit more at ease, seeing the King still had an ego the size of the sun. *"I am a born King, my nobility more rightful than anyone else present."*

Jacob frowned at the response. Everyone else was silent before the Sword Saint stepped forward and spoke. "Fallen King, I can't help but notice you do not come alone?"

That is when Jake actually paid attention to the two people the King had brought along. A man and a woman, both clearly human. The King actually stood a step back as the two introduced themselves.

"I am the local mayor of a yet-to-be-named city under the control of the Fallen King, and this is the representative of our newly established crafting guild," the woman said. "We were all wanderers in an especially dangerous part of the planet, quite a bit away from any larger settlement, but were eventually recruited by the King to inhabit his lands. Currently, we are rapidly constructing our territory, but we already have tens of thousands who have sought refuge under our banner."

"A bit convenient, isn't it?" Carmen said. "A monster appears out of nothing and is suddenly all friendly to humans without anyone knowing before now. Excuse me if I find it a little suspicious."

The King turned to her as his voice echoed again.

*"Do not think me foolish enough to believe I am almighty. I have learned that humans are not a race to ever underestimate, and I do not plan to do such. In fact, I want humanity to prosper on this planet more than ever before, and I believe I can make that possible,"* the King answered.

"How so?" the Sword Saint asked.

*"Through power and my existence as neither beast nor human. I have observed the antagonistic relationship and believe this conflict will only escalate. Beasts desire the resources of humans, while humans desire the resources provided by slaying beasts. It is an unavoidable circle of slaughter, but one I believe can be managed. Sapient beasts are plentiful, and many of them do not desire conflict, and as long as humanity and the*



*sapient*s work together, the feral can be controlled. But to make this happen, an entity needs to function as a mediator. One that cares not for humans, beasts, elementals, or monsters, but at the same time cares for all of them equally. Something... Unique," the Fallen King explained himself, and Jake finally understood what was going on.

The Fallen King was actually throwing his hat in the ring to become World Leader. The vote would take place in an hour, and he had already taken the opportunity to voice his stance and make a proposal to humanity.

"Which naturally begs the question... if you don't care for any party, what is in it for you to act as this mediator?" Jacob asked. He seemed oddly thrown off, and Jake could feel his old boss really struggling internally as he tried to grasp the situation.

*"A silly question you should have realized already. I am a King. I am a ruler. To rule is my Path, simple as that. A world that is not wrought by unnecessary war will reward me more, and I am not blind to the benefits humanity can bring. I even chose to harbor humans and defend them out of purely selfish ambition. I desire what humans can create. Their minds and their ingenuity. I will have to look far to find beasts worth a proper conversation, while in any human settlement, I can find plenty of minds worth sparring with."*

He really had all the answers. Jake was surprised to see this side of the King. He knew the King wasn't stupid from their talks after he had awakened the Unique Lifeform, but he did not expect a being such as the King to understand things such as diplomacy and acting with moderation. The King was still overbearing, sure, but not to the point of putting everyone off. Jake also felt a very subtle aura, making it clear the King had actual leadership skills and skills most city leaders possessed.

"You are aiming for World Leader?" a man from the back suddenly asked. Jake turned and saw it was Jacob's father, Arthur, who had finally decided to join the conversation.

*"None is more qualified. While you here may believe you are here to elect a leader of humanity, you are selecting the leader of the entire world. Unless you plan to suppress or annihilate all other races but your own, you will need to compromise. I am a being in the middle that can serve as that compromise,"* the King explained again.

"In other words, you want us to subjugate ourselves to an unknown lifeform that has suddenly appeared?" Read full story at [novel•fire•net](http://novel.fire.net)

*"An oversimplified interpretation I do not fully agree with. What is the difference between subjugating yourself to another human or I? Unless you insist on trying to claim racial superiority, in which case I must disappoint. None are superior to I,"* the King said, allowing some of that good old arrogance to shine through.

Not that anyone who knew anything about Unique Lifeforms could object. It was a statement one could argue was objective as Unique Lifeforms were peak creatures of the multiverse.

"No, I believe you oversimplify. No one said a monarchical structure is the only valid one. We are gathered here today as a congress. Why should a single being be granted power over all others? In our old world, we had democracy. Each individual held power, and everyone could vote equally. This ideology was tried and tested as superior to any individual leader for more reasons than any of us have time to hear," Arthur argued.

*"An interesting idea. However, it relies on assumptions no longer applicable. Equality is nothing but a dream and an ideology that can only exist if the strong permit it. Power rules all in this world if you like it or not. Even if you try to change such a system, you need the power to do so."*

It was a conversation Jake was pretty sure he had heard before, and one where he honestly didn't bother picking a side. However, he had to admit that organizations with singular leaders were the norm in the multiverse, even if exceptions did exist. For those exceptions, it was only that way because everyone was equal in power or because the strongest member allowed it to be so.

*"But it should be obvious that any World Leader elected will not deal with every issue or even have an opinion. I am not rejecting the concept of voting or having representations. I am merely saying to have one being act as the backing and facilitator of these decisions. This individual will only have the interests of the people in mind, as ruling through tyranny is simply inefficient. Unless, of course, that individual belongs to a faction with an ideology they wish to enact upon the world. Such as the will of a god,"* the King said, clearly calling out nearly all of the major forces on Earth.

This led to some discussion as the conversation was officially derailed. Like before, the independent factions weren't a big fan of organizations like the Holy Church coming in and ruling the planet for some new god. This was a conflict that had been ongoing since Earth was integrated and one Jake doubted would end anytime soon.

Jake and everyone from Haven had been silent so far, but the three of them had looked at him a bit weirdly ever since the King appeared. The reason was obvious, and soon enough, the question also came as one of the leaders of a religious faction tried to refocus the talks.

"I just have one burning question," Jacob asked as he finally mentioned the elephant in the room. One most had been waiting to ask but had held their tongue on as the flow of conversation was led elsewhere.

"Why do you wear the same mask as Lord Thayne? What is your relationship?"

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## Chapter 437: Discussing the Future of Earth

Now, honestly, Jake felt really put on the spot. He had just dealt with the damn Bloodline debacle at the Order and had believed this entire World Congress would be a relaxing time where he could chill with friends and do some voting and stuff. You know, he just wanted to enjoy it a little.

But no, the King had to show up and make everything incredibly complicated, so instead of getting a nice and relaxing break, Jake went straight from the frying pan and into the fire.

Everyone looked back and forth between the King and Jake. Perhaps some had not noticed it to begin with, but the two masks did look exactly the same. Which made sense because the mask Jake wore on his face was kind of a clone of the King as far as Jake knew. In fact, it was the "real" body Jake always had on his face, while the King before him was... well, also the real body.

Yeah, Jake still wasn't sure exactly how it worked.

However, before the King answered the crowd, Jake asked the question that had been burning in his mind. Not openly, but directed only at the King. He reached out mentally, and the King responded as he made a telepathic bridge.

*"I thought you said you couldn't surpass me in level?"* Jake asked first thing.

*"So did I, but it appears I miscalculated, even if I just learned now you are, in fact, below me in level. You see, I assumed my Soulspace would surpass yours in power if my level did, and the two would have to be roughly equal, but it was clear my assumptions were wrong somewhere. Parts of me wondered what would happen if I surpassed your level, but my Soulspace never surpassed yours. I primarily assumed I would hit a wall, so I kept slaughtering and claiming my land as I waited for that to happen. It never did. Ah, but I am certain that advancing in grade will be impossible before you, so do not dally,"* the King answered.

The exchange between the King and Jake was nearly instantaneous due to its telepathic nature, so in the view of everyone else present, the King and Jake had just stared at each other for a moment before the Unique Lifeform answered Jacob's question.

*"He is why I am fallen,"* the King simply answered.

Jacob, who seemed to have managed to collect himself a bit, continued down this line of questioning.

"I may be incorrect, but you were formerly known as the King of the Forest, the final opponent of the Tutorial that Lord Thayne and I were in?

"Correct," the King answered.

"In which case, how are you alive? To my knowledge, he gained the title of Progenitor through slaying you," Jacob asked.

Jake once more had attention gathered on him as he seriously considered if he should talk about now? Well, the King was handling it so far, so maybe he should just let him do the talking, eh, telepathy.

*"We Unique Lifeforms have our own ways of survival. And can I not ask you the same? To my knowledge, you were slain too during the tutorial but had methods to stay alive. The same is true for the Risen and that other mage. There are endless methods to survive, so do you truly find it that surprising?"* the King said, doing some good old whataboutism.

This led to some looking at Jacob at the revelation he had died. Surviving death was an odd concept to most, and Jake actually had a feeling it made Jacob appear better. However, it also sought to derail the conversation, something Jacob was clearly not willing to do.

"This answers how you met, not why you are standing where you are today or the nature of your relationship with Lord Thayne," Jacob stated.

*"I believe the simplest term would be that the hunter is my bane. If you wish for a balancing scale on this planet, he can fulfill that role, as even now, I hold no confidence in surviving if he sought to end my reign,"* the King answered.

Jake was kind of happy he had shut up as the King was seriously spinning the truth. Jake understood why too... there were plenty of skills to discern truths, and even if they didn't work fully, they at least had to have partial effects. Downright lying would probably trigger them, at least. Of course, it was also possible the King was partly truthful for some other reason.

Jacob looked at Jake with questioning eyes, and Jake decided to also be truthful. "I have killed the King once, and I can do it again. Trust me, it wouldn't even be a fight; I know his weakness."

Hey, it wasn't a lie? It was Jake being one hundred percent honest and not at all obscuring the truth.

"If what you are saying is true, wouldn't that just mean picking you effectively puts Jake in charge?" Carmen suddenly raised her hand and asked.

*"Yes and no. It would give him veto, yes, but calling him in charge would be inaccurate as the hunter cares not for leadership of any kind. Merely look at who truly leads his city currently. His position would be comparable to that, except I would not seek to make decisions benefitting him, but everyone under my rule,"* the King answered.

"Let us say we do believe everything you said. Let us assume you do have the wellbeing of this planet in mind. Choosing to elect you World Leader within an hour of meeting you.. doesn't that sound like a hasty and unwise choice?" Arthur rejoined the conversation.

*"It does, and it would confirm you are all incompetent leaders and not worth respecting in the long term,"* the King answered, getting a varied response. Some looked offended, others looked like everything suddenly made sense, and people like Jake didn't quite have time to get what the King was playing at before he continued after an adequately long dramatic pause.

*"Which is why I would advocate for not selecting one during this vote. By my estimates, I hold roughly a fourth or a fifth of the total votes by myself, meaning that if I do not vote for anyone, their chances of being elected are slim. I am also aware that no other faction would have the votes even without my presence here. No, I come today to open up a line of communication and a chance to prove my competency. Let me also make it clear, no King rules alone. Even if I do ultimately get elected, none will lose their positions unless deemed incompetent, as I see no purpose in ruining what already works, and I am also acutely aware that hostile takeovers would mean war with many factions,"* the King explained.

Miranda nodded along as she seemed to agree with the King for the most part. There also didn't seem to be much resistance, and a few new players even joined the conversation.

"The Risen do agree that a time to prove oneself is necessary. We are not opposed as we believe inclusivity is key to a well-functioning society. I just want to confirm if the Fallen King has any thoughts on the Risen?" Priscilla asked.

*"None in particular. Any creature with a soul is living in my eyes, and I shall confess, I do not even possess the usual sensory organs of you humans or Risen. To me, you all look alike aside from some faint differences in energy signatures."*

This again got a varied response. Some humans seemed to frown, especially many of those associated with the Holy Church and independent factions. Jake did notice Arthur didn't seem to hold any strong opinion on the Risen, which at least was a good sign. Jacob's dad likely represented more Pylons than anyone else, and Jake had a thought the man could be quite influential when he wanted to.

“What are your thoughts on this, Lord Thayne?” Arthur suddenly asked as he looked at Jake.

Being put on the spot again, Jake took a moment to think before he answered. “Who leads Earth or not really isn’t that big of a concern to me. In my eyes, the multiverse is far larger than this planet, and even if Earth will forever be my home, I only consider Haven truly mine. So as long as whatever faction or individual gets elected leaves Haven alone and lets it stay neutral, I truly don’t care.”

“You have no interest in spreading the influence of the Order of the Malefic Viper?” Jacob’s dad further questioned.

“None whatsoever. Neither does the Malefic Viper. Not to be an ass, but the Viper has made it pretty clear he cares little for a small planet such as Earth. He cares about individuals and not dead rock if it comes down to things. Ultimately the Order is the kind of organization that doesn’t recruit by taking over territory but by people coming to join it. If the Order does take over a territory, it wouldn’t be through me trying to weasel my way into becoming World Leader, but by overwhelming force,” Jake answered truthfully.

Miranda decided to also finally join the conversation as she added to what Jake said.

“I also want to point out that Haven is still only in possession of a single Pylon and thus far have made no efforts to expand except the natural growth of said Pylon. Haven is still open to members of any faction to visit, and besides some basic rules, we welcome everyone. The only religious institution we have is a temple where anyone is allowed to place a statue as long as it passes some basic evaluations. All of this is to say, Haven truly has no desire to reach for more power or influence besides being a neutral force that hopes our independence can be respected no matter who becomes World Leader,” she said.

It wasn’t anything new, and Jake knew she had emphasized this repeatedly when talking to other factions. But hey, reemphasizing was always good, especially with new people present.

“There is just one issue,” Caleb said, also bringing himself and the Court of Shadows into play. “As of now, we are only a single planet, and while this vote may only appear to pertain to Earth, we must acknowledge that is only for now. In the context of the old world, a country was just a piece of land on a single planet, but in the multiverse, countries expand across entire star sectors.”

Jake frowned at this as he understood the implications. Caleb continued as he voiced exactly what Jake had also just realized.

“So let’s say any single faction is elected World Leader and agrees to leave every other faction alone to act independently while not allowing them to continue to expand. What happens in a few hundred years? What happens when the entire solar system is



conquered? When in times to come, potentially entire parts of the galaxy are conquered? Even if a small piece of land such as Haven remains, it will be cut off. Defensive formations covering the entire country will isolate them, and I see no scenario where a true multiversal kingdom will allow so many factions to have teleportation arrays placed in its heart. Especially not opposing factions such as the Risen and Holy Church,” Caleb voiced his concerns. This chapter is updated by **novel●fire●net**

“Isn’t this putting the cart before the horse?” Arthur argued from afar. “You postulate a scenario so far off I don’t see why it is relevant to discuss at the current time.”

“So far off?” Caleb answered back. “No, this is all within our near futures. The timescale of the multiverse moves differently from what we are used to. Every single person in this room will live hundreds of years more unless killed. Within that time, this entire planet will surely be conquered, and whatever factions accomplish this will surely seek to expand.”

“What are you arguing then?” Arthur asked. “That we all just fully submit to one faction?”

“No, I am not proposing any solutions, just pointing out problems. No matter who wins, the Court of Shadow will likely stay. As a known faction or an unknown one, we tend to be good at staying in the shadows. It’s kind of what we do,” Caleb shrugged. “I just don’t wanna see my home planet fall into civil war and would prefer to stay in the light. At least partly.”

*“All issues I believe there will be found solutions to in due time,” the King reentered the discussion. “However, to propose one solution is to have borderline no protection besides the sheer knowledge this area is inhabited by so many powerful factions. I can understand why the Holy Church and Risen would have issues co-existing, but even so, no war shall begin. If war means not only offending one opposing faction but all those present on the planet along with so many prolific individuals, not even the Church or Risen would risk conflict. Additionally, this shall naturally serve as an aegis for the weaker factions as the aggression of any large force to usurp a smaller one will be frowned upon.”*

Caleb shrugged again. “Maybe, maybe not. I still see it be incredibly risky if any faction can just teleport people in.”

*“They would be able to anyway, or do you truly believe any organization anyone on this planet can establish in a few centuries can match even a fraction of a true power of the multiverse? No, we would be crushed if any truly powerful and ancient being decided to descend. Unless, of course, they fear an equally or more powerful entity to descend in response,” the King added to his argument.*

“Making Earth such a place of high tension with so many innocent and uninvolved citizens living here seems unwise, and almost like we are disregarding their presence,” Jacob said.



*"It is also high tension to attempt to force everyone into one ideology. No conquest of a planet ever ends peacefully. Augur, you know as well as I that if the Holy Church were to act according to their usual modus operandi, this planet would become a homogenous society not by understanding and inclusion, but by forced assimilation and cleansing,"* the King said. He more or less took a direct jab at the Church; however, he also further added.

*"Not that I hold much faith in any other organization or faction of the multiverse to do much better. The Court would lock the planet down and use it to recruit new assassins. In an ideal situation, the Risen would attune the entire planet to their own magic, and Valhal would turn it into nothing more than a massive hunting ground on which everything is killed before rebuilding from the ruins, just to take a few examples."*

"What about us?" the Sword Saint asked with a smile.

*"You, I know little about. However, the Noboru clan, as you call yourself, has the massive issue of being nothing more than a fledgling faction that will be gobbled up by other forces if you wish for it to or not. Even if you seek to stay independent, this can only happen if another faction allows you. Granted, I will not argue that the god who blessed you won't choose to intervene and act as a shield, but in that case, what makes you different from someone like the hunter? Naturally, all of this assumes the Noboru clan are truly virtuous and seeks only the best for everyone, something I doubt based on the history of this world,"* the King answered curtly.

The Sword Saint just nodded in response. "Arguing against history and your ignorance of my faction seems futile, and I will not claim any faction perfect. On the note of gods, am I correct to assume Unique Lifeforms are unable to be blessed?"

It was a question many already knew the answer to. Jake, of course, did. Jacob likely did, as well as many leaders of major factions. However, many didn't, and while Jake wasn't sure if the old man knew, the question would still serve as a clarification for everyone.

*"That is correct. Unique Lifeforms are unable to obtain the blessings of gods, for we need no guidance nor to be shown a Path. We are to forge our own or die trying to realize what we were born to be,"* the King arrogantly answered. Almost prideful at being unable to be blessed.

The old man nodded as he stated a conclusion it was pretty obvious would eventually be reached. "For the vote of World Leader, the Noboru Clan will choose to vote for ourselves with the goal of electing no one."

"The Court shall do the same," Caleb quickly added.

"Us too," Miranda said, Jake naturally not disagreeing.

“Very well,” Jacob nodded.

The rest of the congress quickly followed suit as it became clear no World Leader would be chosen during the Second World Congress.

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## Chapter 438: Paths To A Better Future

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

The vote ended as everyone expected with no World Leader elected. Jake had decided to just vote for Neil for fun, getting a weird look from the guy afterward. It had actually gone about as Miranda had theorized before they entered the World Congress, with, of course, the small change of the King being present.

Miranda had not believed any World Leader would be elected due to how many dissenting opinions still existed. The Noboru clan and Holy Church alone opposed the other gaining power, the Risen would want neither but prefer the Noboru clan, the independents wanted neither of them, and Valhal wanted who-knows-what.

The Court of Shadows and Haven didn't really matter much anymore voting-wise as they were beaten out by sheer numbers. However, their opinions could still sway some, and not having their support would potentially only lead to trouble down the line. The same was true for Eron, who had been oddly silent since the entire event began, almost hiding away.

Determining who was happy or not with this conclusion wasn't hard determining either. The Holy Church seemed disappointed, and the Noboru clan also appeared to hope that they would have won the vote. In fact, Jake got the feeling the Noboru clan and many of the independents associated with Arthur had made some kind of agreement.

However, it seemed like most had assumed this vote would end in no winner as a foregone conclusion. Getting sixty percent of the votes was no easy task, and no faction had confidence in achieving it as things currently were on Earth. In fact, Jake was unsure a real agreement of more than sixty percent would ever be reached.

This is why both he and Miranda had agreed that all of this was just planting the seeds of the next World Congress, where according to the rules, a World Leader had to be

selected. No one knew how the next election would work, but the best guess was that it would simply be the individual with the most votes who wins.

With the end of the first vote, a new one instantly began. Jake had wondered what the next vote would be about. A new shop of some kind? A system event? Something entirely different? Well, it sure did turn out to be different than Jake had expected.

**The second vote of the World Congress will relate to allowing those who have yet to find their Path to do so.**

**As the world progresses and many begin to find their footing, some stumble as they fail to find their Path. They reach an impasse as their progress stops and their motivation dies. This event is one that will allow those who faltered to reignite their inner fire and discover their true Path. At the same time, members of the World Congress can decide which direction they wish for their planet to go.**

**The voting options are as follows:**

**1.Paths of the Unusual Unions**

**2.Paths of the Heretical Few**

**3.Paths of the Devoted Ones**

**4.Paths of the Lonely Souls**

**5.Paths of the Independent Worlds**

**6.Paths of the Recognized Supremes**

**7.Paths of the Submissive Realists**

**Additionally, an event will open up for those overqualified to participate in this system event known as the Path of Myriad Choices. This event will allow those able to enter to explore another potential Path they may have followed and seek inspiration from it, or perhaps choose to change their Path entirely. Further information on how to qualify for this event will follow.**

**All of these events will potentially allow participants to change their current class, profession, or race based on the nature and their experiences during the event.**

**Voting will begin in: 3:59:59**

Jake carefully read it over, and he had to admit... it was not what he expected. He also tried to poke the options a bit, fishing for a response, but it did nothing. In other words,

they would have to vote purely based on the names of the seven paths and what they could deduce from them.

The entire congress hall was silent as everyone read the option and description. Jake frowned a bit the more he understood what this was about and how it wasn't directed at him besides that extra event. Jake knew his own Path, and this event seemed to be aimed at those who didn't. It was an event to boost up not only the elite but was for everyone.

He saw Jacob smile out of the corner of his eye, the Sword Saint nod in approval, and many of those at the independent factions also look at it with great interest. Jake was still interested as he wanted to see what that extra event Path of Myriad Choices was all about.

*"Interesting proposition by the system, alas a vote in which I will recuse myself from participating, even if I do have my own opinions on the matter. This seems to be for you humans more than anyone else, and no matter the choice, it will benefit other races if they can participate,"* the King said, being the first to speak.

Jacob chose to take the opportunity to follow up as he spoke. "Rather than argue what is the best choice, can we agree to exclude some initially? I believe there are some that should naturally be disregarded."

"Why? Becoming a planet of heretics seems like a great way to get it blown up," Carmen joked in response.

"Indeed it would be. Hence why, I believe it a natural one to exclude. While we have no details on each option, I also believe excluding Paths of the Lonely Souls just based on the name would be wise. Humans – or beasts for that matter – do better in groups than on their lonesome, and this entire scenario is clearly aimed at the masses and not the powerful individuals. The lonely souls have already found their paths; they do not need this," Jacob added, getting primarily approving nods.

"The independent factions would also vote to exclude the third, sixth and seventh option for obvious reasons. Devoted Ones reek of recognizing a singular religion or turning our world into a theocracy. Recognized Supremes appear like one where the paths are all about assisting those already at the top, and the seventh option should be excluded by name alone," Arthur argued, his words rather similar to Jacob's.

"There is more to devotion than recognition of a god. It can be a devotion to a good life or the community. Even if it is aimed at factions with religious leanings, that does not necessarily mean it is only for them," Jacob said as a counterargument.

"I don't remember you being openly ignorant to reality," Arthur answered as he looked sharply at Jacob. "I am more surprised you didn't argue for selecting Submissive Realists as that seems to describe the Holy Church more than anything."

"Submission is a choice that should not be made out of fear or recognizing it as the only realistic option remaining, so naturally, I disagree with that option. I am surprised you didn't instantly argue that we should choose the Lonely Souls options. You seem to have quite the talent for pushing people away," Jacob answered with a smile. You know, the kind of smile that wasn't really a smile.

Jake felt like this pretty much confirmed there was some kind of beef between the two of them. This was a bit surprising as Jake remembered the father and son seemed quite close before the system. Did Arthur just not agree with Jacob taking up the mantle of Augur? Or was Jacob disappointed Arthur directly opposed him?

"Independent Worlds and Unusual Unions," the Sword Saint cut in, stopping the two men from airing their personal grievances of the other. "I do believe there is much positive to be said about independence, but so is there for unions. To call the current situation on Earth an unusual union would not necessarily be an incorrect description. The only question is, are what we are seeing on Earth truly a union or merely a temporary moment of peace? Not that independent Worlds is that much better as we are all but independent forces many of us."

"This vote is clearly as much about what we want Earth to become as what it currently is," Caleb said. "The Court of Shadows have little input on these options, but the prior conversation about the future of Earth is very relevant. Do we want it to be an unusual union of forces or an independent entity capable of functioning regardless of the factions? In many ways, was the goal not to become an independent world through an unusual union, mixing the two a bit?"

"That is one interpretation," Priscilla said. "The Independent Worlds choice can also have an emphasis on the "worlds" part. As it currently exists, Earth is but one world, but there are ways to make several smaller dimensions or even small worlds within the same area. I do find it entirely possible this choice is not about uniting the factions in any way but having each capable of properly isolating themselves from each other."

"Fair enough," Caleb relented with a nod. "In that case, is that truly something we want? It would also inevitably result in only one faction ruling the true space of Earth with little interaction between each force."

"It is a safer choice if that is truly what it is about, but we also have to question what exactly these Paths the system offers will be about and what the majority of the denizens of Earth would resonate with," Jacob reentered the conversation. He was clearly done with the useless bickering with his father, and besides the two throwing sharp looks the other's way, they stayed civil.

*Definitely something there*, Jake nodded. Now, what was Jake's opinion on this vote? Well, to be perfectly honest, he didn't really care much. He was clearly also the only one who would even be fine with the heretic choice. Speaking of which, it was interesting the

system even offered such a path. Then again, it was just one extreme end of the spectrum, and so far, it felt like the system was impartial on the topic.

Miranda also began participating as Jake listened in but ultimately knew this truly didn't concern him. As Jacob had said, this choice was as much about what would resonate with those of Earth, and Jake hadn't even been on the planet for the last couple of months. He would leave again the moment this World Congress ended, assuming where he currently was could even be considered on Earth.

To believe he had any fucking clue what those who couldn't find their Path needed or wanted to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" would be stupid even for him. Jake was privileged and knew his own Path already near-perfectly, and he had his own goals. In nearly all ways, this entire vote had nothing to do with him.

Luckily, it appeared the discussions soon reached an impasse, and it was decided for the factions to spread out and have some more intimate discussions and deal-making. It was also an excuse to have all the space mages become able to group up and discuss space mage stuff and a lot of merchants to meet up. Lillian went with the merchants, and Neil was, of course, a space mage.

Miranda went over to the Sword Saint right away, and Jake considered what his plans were for a moment before he decided to head over to the only other person who looked about as bored as he was: Carmen.

Also, he had noticed her throwing him the occasional glance during the meeting before. She looked like she wanted to talk to him, and as he had nothing better to do, why not?

Jake went up to her and waved. "Long time no see."

"Hey," Carmen greeted in return. "How is Sylphie?"

He should have known. Sylphie had talked about Carmen a few times, calling her the "nice punchy lady," and it seemed like Carmen also liked Sylphie equally.

"She is doing fine. Had some fun doing a dungeon and is otherwise just flying around in the forest and hunting things. That, or she is hanging out with her parents, probably still hunting things for some quality family time," Jake answered with a smile.

"Her parents?" Carmen asked, interested.

Jake realized Carmen truly only knew Sylphie from the Treasure Hunt and seeing how they had the time...

"Oh boy, let me tell you about the time I was attacked and taught how to fly by a random hawk just after getting my wings and said hawk decided to bring me to his and his mate's nest to make a super baby hawk."



The two of them ended up heading for Haven's booth and isolated it as they just chatted while everyone else was working. Jake had considered doing alchemy during this period, but he was currently working on poisons, so he wasn't sure he could attempt to concoct something during the World Congress lest the fumes count as attacking others. Read complete version only at [novel·fire·net](http://novel.fire.net)

Carmen also shared what she had been up to in recent times. Primarily that she had focused on her profession like so many others and was currently forging her "weapons."

Jake was a bit confused at what the weaponless fighter meant until she took out a dagger and jammed it down onto her own palm, only to see the blade be deflected, unable to even scratch the skin. "The Path I walk is one where my body becomes my weapon. I am good at punching people, that is all I am good at, and while I could use gloves before to somewhat alleviate damage to my fists, I recently became able to refine them."

"Wait, how strong can you make them?" Jake inquired.

"Remembering your battle with the Sword Saint at the end of the Treasure Hunt, I am pretty sure I would be able to directly block the blade with my fist once refinement is complete," she explained with a confident smile.

"How exactly does it work? And... well, can I do it too?"

Yeah, Jake was shameless, so what? Seriously, he had his gloves which became incredibly durable when infused with mana, but the mana expenditure was great and only grew the more powerful a blow he blocked. To passively have his hands be as tough as an actual weapon? Oh boy, he could only imagine his Touch of the Malefic Viper-powered punches.

"Well, probably not. It is tied to my profession and is expensive as fuck. Moreover, it doesn't work if I use weapons," she explained, putting a dampener on Jake's hopes and dreams.

"Well, that's too bad. Speaking of which, what god is it that blessed you?" Jake finally asked. He didn't actually know.

"Well, Gudrun. It was first another guy who seemed cool enough, but he quickly said I didn't really fit his teaching anyway, so instead, I got blessed by Gudrun. She is apparently the wife of the bigshot of Valhal called Valdemar," Carmen answered. "Gotta be honest, doesn't feel good to be tossed from god to god like that, but Gudrun has been great so far, even if she is a bit hands-off, and I mainly get advice from C-grades these days through some rituals from my profession."

"Huh. Gotta say, sure are a lot of Primordials hanging around Earth," Jake chuckled a bit.



“All your fault, oh mighty Chosen of the evil ancient snake god,” Carmen snickered.

“Hey, it is what it is. He is a friend, and that is that,” he shrugged.

“Sure,” Carmen just shook her head, changing the topic. “Remember when you said you owed me a favor after that thing with Limit Break during the Treasure Hunt... were you serious?”

Jake sure did remember and nodded. “As long as it isn’t anything ludicrous.”

“You are a hunter, right? Do you know how to track people? Not now, but when I am done with my refinement, and you got time.”

“I can do a bit of tracking, but it really depends. I do have a tracking skill, and my Perception is decent enough. Moreover, I am always up for a challenge. Why? What do you need to track?” Jake asked

“Not a what, but who... I wanted to ask your help to track down my family. I think it is about time for a proper reunion,” Carmen said with an odd smile that Jake wasn’t quite sure what to make of.

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## Chapter 439: A Good Chat & Hidden Agendas

Jake knew he wasn’t exactly a tracker. He could track a little, and his senses were sharper than ever. With some clues, his tracking skill would allow him to chase mana signatures and other signs, though, of course, there were many who were significantly more qualified. Jacob was probably the best on the planet, but there had to be many more who were far more effective than Jake. Something he felt like he did need to voice.

“While I can track, I am not exactly good at it compared to others. I am sure you can ask some seer or something who is far better at it,” Jake said.

It was primarily that she wanted to find her family, which meant it was solely a tracking job. Jake had kind of assumed she needed help tracking some powerful beast or something, but if it was just some humans, she could find far better. Jake had kind of assumed she asked him because fighting strong stuff would be involved.

"I am already on it and have worked with some to boil down the general area. However, it looks like they are on the other side of a large body of water. Based on some space mages from Midtgaard, it is probably around where that guy Arthur and many of the independent factions are located," Carmen explained but still didn't address one point.

"I am still sure you can find better once you get there, and if you wanted assistance getting across this body of water, you could have just asked for that," Jake answered a bit suspiciously.

Carmen just sighed. "Yeah, but I want someone to help who isn't affiliated with Valhal or anything like that. This is purely a personal thing."

Jake finally nodded. "Okay, fine. Do you have any plans on when you want to go and how we are supposed to get there? You know, all the logistics."

"No fucking idea quite yet, but from what I hear, the space mages in a nearby port-city should soon have a circle up and running. Once that works, I can get word to Miranda, and she can contact you about getting to the port? It will be a bit from Haven, but hopefully, the teleportation network will reach there by then, making the journey not too annoying," Carmen answered. "I know you are currently busy elsewhere, but you can return to our universe, right?"

"I can," Jake nodded. "How do you know I am not on Earth currently? And does everyone know?"

"Miranda told me, and no, I don't think others know. Apparently, you are super hard to track. Ah, but don't blame her for telling me. She did it after getting permission from those gods who blessed her. By the way, how does that work? I thought you could only be blessed by one god at a time," Carmen explained, quickly derailing herself into a barely tangentially-related question.

"A mix of god stuff and system-fuckery, I reckon," Jake answered incredibly accurately.

"Makes sense," Carmen nodded, not a hint of sarcasm in her voice. Well, it did make sense as much as any other answer. "We have an agreement then? I will tell Miranda, and then she will send a response back? Don't worry, I already got ways of contacting her. Or, well, she's got ways of contacting me with her weird witchy magic."

"Miranda does have weird witchy magic," Jake nodded in understanding. He had to admit, he had no fucking clue how any of her skills worked. Even as he began learning a bit about formations and such, he only came to realize her magic was even more complicated and reliant on an entirely different school of thought than the kind of magic Jake wanted to learn.

The two of them kept talking a bit longer about random stuff as Jake learned how Carmen was taught. Apparently, she could set up virtual battlefields of some sort and

fight echoes of individuals located pretty much anywhere, even in other universes. The echoes had corresponding magic circles on their end set up by Valhal to facilitate all this, with Carmen essentially being a summoner. These echoes couldn't actually interact with anything non-simulated outside the battlefield, but it was still an incredibly valuable tool.

Valhal was an organization all about war. Not just the act of fighting but war as a concept, which had also led to Valdemar being called the God of War. Legends spawned from war, the songs of bards, the concept of morale, armies clashing, celebrating after a victory, or dealing with the emotions after a lost battle. All of this was part of what Valhal stood for, and in many ways, they were a truly neutral faction in the multiverse in that they didn't truly have any enemies.

Because an enemy would mean war, and Valhal had never lost a war. The mere thought of Valhal declaring war on a faction was almost like a scary story one would tell their kids. The tales of the times it had happened where Valdemar had picked up his axe and led what was known as a Warband into battle. Individuals of all grades, hundreds of gods, descending all at once with no regard for their lives, caring for nothing but a good battle and to die with honor.

Other factions were constantly at war. The Holy Church and the Ghostlands – the land of the Risen – were at constant war. Several factions not fans of the Court of Shadows had declared war against the assassins. Jake also learned that the Automata and the Endless Empire were also at war and had been for the last thirty Eras. The Endless Empire was a faction Jake had never heard of before and consisted of some of the most powerful Ectognamorphs in existence, led by a large coalition of powerful Hive Queens. Insect Queens who had ascended to godhood and commanded armies of unprecedented scale. They were, in general, incredibly warlike as they viewed it as a healthy way to constantly thin their herds and grow in power by weeding out the weak.

Yet not even they wanted a war with Valhal.

And if Jake was being honest, he totally understood why. It was a bit similar to why no one wanted conflict with the Order of the Malefic Viper. Most wars only involved the mortals, but if Valhal went to war, they pulled out all the stops and made it a war where one side was annihilated. Meanwhile, Villy would ensure that even if the other side won, it would bring about so much devastation and death upon them it wouldn't be worth it.

The reason for this was simple enough... Villy didn't care about having a controlled war, and Valhal viewed war as something where a side had to win. They still wanted to battle, of course, and members of Valhal were primarily known as incredibly powerful mercenaries who joined the side they agreed with the most in a conflict. Carmen even told Jake it often happened that two members of Valhal found themselves facing each other on a battlefield. The result of that would nearly always be one of them dead and the other one having a toast for the fallen comrade he had just slain.

So yeah, Valhal was a paradise for battle maniacs, and Jake felt like he would have fit in pretty damn well. Carmen also seemed happy with it and had an interesting perspective on fighting former comrades or people from the same faction.

“Fighting is fighting. I used to do boxing, and it was normal to fight friends or former colleagues. I was in quite a small town with only one noteworthy gym, and I often ended up fighting people in tournaments I had trained with and gotten along with before. That didn’t mean I would show the slightest restraint in the ring, though. The same is true for the warriors of Valhal... in fact, holding back when you see another member on the opposing side would just be disrespectful. Valdemar allegedly once said that dying in battle is an honorable death, and an honorable death is a good death. A good death means it was a worthy life, and all worthy lives are worth celebrating and remembering.”

Jake had once more found himself nodding along. Jake had a lot of rather infantile views on honor in his early days of the system. He remembered burying the guy Nicholas as he had put up a good fight, and he had refused to loot entire beast corpses as he found it disrespectful. His opinion had eventually been refined, and Jake now no longer cared as much about a concept such as honor. He had his own rules of sorts, and while those rules may be considered honorable by some, Jake didn’t particularly care.

They did agree on a good death being a worthwhile death. Jake viewed dying to anything else than a good fight as a nightmare. Carmen was like him, also a battle maniac, and as they talked, they both looked back on the fight with the Monarch of Blood fondly, even if Carmen had found the conclusion of it incredibly frustrating.

“By the way, is it fine for us to talk in here? People may start rumors we are plotting an alliance or something,” Jake suddenly asked jokingly. “Not that I am complaining. I am sure Miranda will view this as good diplomatic work.”

“Nah, who cares. Sven also kept insisting I should get closer to Haven and the old swordsman, so I guess this counts,” she shrugged.

“Where is Sven, by the way?” Jake asked. He wasn’t at the World Congress, which was a bit weird.

“In a dungeon, I think? He entered with his party a good while ago and has yet to get out. Who knows, maybe they all died,” Carmen just shrugged. “Not sure if people can enter the World Congress if they are in a dungeon or if they were just too busy doing other stuff. He is there with a party of five, and he would only bring one of them if he went to the World Congress, so bailing on more than half the party would also be a shitty move. Sven had at least made plans in case he and the others would not be back in time.

“Huh,” Jake nodded. “You done the dungeon? Is it any good?”

Yeah, probably not the part he was supposed to bite onto. Jake hadn't found any good dungeons in a while, and he knew his class was probably going to get a bit behind his profession if he kept focusing on alchemy within the Order. So a good dungeon would be a great way to catch up on some levels.

"Eh, I have been in there once but didn't clear it. It seemed okayish. It was a plant dungeon, and most of the enemies were around level 140. It was not that hard, honestly, and I saw nothing that could take down Sven and his party at all, but it was large and annoying to navigate as the entire dungeon seemed to rearrange itself constantly with a lot of ambush predators lurking about," Carmen answered.

"Aight," Jake nodded, not sure if he wanted to even do that dungeon if he could. 140 was way too low for him, though it was possible more powerful foes would appear further in.

"Speaking of challenges... how the hell did you beat that masked monster?" Carmen finally asked.

"Oh man, that is a long story, but to make it short, a bunch of overpowered bullshit items meant to specifically counter him, a lot of luck, me being awesome, and then another massive dose of luck to tie it all together," Jake semi-joked.

"And you are confident in winning again? I will be honest; I don't trust that masked freak for even a second. He may have the King title, but that doesn't make him a good leader. Shit, you are an Earl, and I wouldn't want you leading even a children's football team," Carmen shook her head.

"Hurtful, but yes, I am confident in bringing down the King if he gets out of control," Jake confirmed.

Carmen nodded. "For the record, I am also a Viscount, but that doesn't mean I think for even a second I can lead."

"I guess the primary qualifier for being a noble so far is one's ability to kill stuff," Jake joked.

"Kind of fucked up when you think about it," Carmen noted.

"Sure is."

Greg kept an eye on the booth and noticed that the female leader of Valhal and the Chosen of the Malefic Viper hadn't exited for a long time. He wondered what their meeting was about as he tried to comprehend the web of deceit and planning this Chosen had deployed. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT *novel•fire•net*

Before the system, Greg had worked as a professional investigator running his own online blog, where he uncovered corruption and government secrets. Some people called him a nutjob, but Greg knew one couldn't trust the masses of sheep who were always blind to the truth and willingly rejected what was right before their eyes.

Many people thought this Lord Thayne was a simple man, but Greg knew differently. The masked man was far from simple and only wished to be perceived as such as he puppeteered the City Leader behind the scenes.

Lord Thayne, if that was truly his real identity, also hid from all kinds of scouting at all times. None of Greg's investigation skills worked, and no divinations or tracking spells had worked when Greg had sought assistance.

Greg had worked in the industry long enough to know that only people who had something to hide would go that far to hide it. It was obvious, and Greg wanted to get to the bottom of it even if it was the last thing he did. His former colleagues and friends all called him paranoid and that he was overthinking things, but could they not connect the dots? All of them led to the same source: the Chosen.

The Augur was the former "boss" of the Chosen. Greg was sure it was backward, but their connection was obvious. The same was true for the influential undead called Casper. They clearly had some kind of relation, and Lord Thayne had influence over him.

Not to get started on the fact that his brother was the leader of the Court of Shadows. The Sword Saint was friendly with him – something Greg theorized was due to the old man also recognizing the threat this man posed to their planet.

Valhal had clearly already fallen under their thumb based on how that woman Carmen had submitted herself and sought him out. He even heard odd rumors that the Chosen had used animals to get closer to her, something that Greg would have found questionable if not for all of the other extreme methods the man – if he was a man – had prepared.

And now... now this Fallen King had suddenly appeared. Finally, he had revealed another of his many hidden cards. A powerful lifeform to function as his puppet to lead the planet into the destiny the Chosen and perhaps even the evil god known as the Malefic Viper desired.

To Greg, the most maddening thing was that no one else could see this. How no one else could put all the data together and reach the same conclusion that the monster known as Lord Thayne was a true master manipulator. A puppeteer of unholy talent and power who controlled nearly every faction from the shadows.

No... maybe people knew but feared speaking it. Maybe the Chosen was so talented that any who realized or spoke openly were removed from existence. His brother did lead a cult of assassins.

As an investigator, Greg had covered many things throughout his life. Uncovered secrets hidden by the elites. But he had never faced anything as intricate, and as grand as the web of lies and pure manipulation the Chosen had spun. Lord Thayne was no doubt the most cunning individual Greg had ever come across... perhaps the most cunning throughout human history.

It was intimidating.

He had already noticed the fallout and influence this “man” had over others. Greg had noticed that a lot of people had stopped talking to him with complaints that he spoke of nothing but his “mad conspiracy theory,” and while some may write that off as Greg just being annoying to be around, Greg knew better. They feared the knowledge he held and what dangers it could bring them.

But Greg would keep fighting. He would prove the truth to everyone else on Earth... he just hoped that the Chosen wouldn't realize his grand design before it was too late.

However... first he had to find out what this grand design even was.

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

## **Chapter 440: A Case of Bad Communication**

The hours quickly passed as Jake just sat back and chatted with Carmen. After a while, the two of them went to talk a bit with the old man too, but he was busy being the leader of the Noboru clan and all that. Honestly, Jake wasn't a big fan of this entire World Congress as there were two votes that didn't matter at all to him personally. He was also annoyed at so many people staring at him constantly, including this guy who kept trying to be sneaky about it and even used some weird scouting skills.

Nevertheless, he was still glad he had attended due to the appearance of the King, and he still had a good talk with Carmen, but he sure wouldn't classify it as productive or a good way to spend his time. Once the political maneuvering was coming to an end, Jake gathered with Miranda and Lillian again, with Neil still busy with other space mages, having occupied a booth by themselves while not allowing others to interfere.



“So, what is the expected outcome of the vote? And what should I vote for?” Jake asked Miranda once in their booth, and they had isolated it properly.

“This one is hard. Many want the Independent Worlds, some want the Devoted Ones. Many also want the Unusual Unions, but it is honestly hard to get a feel for the room, and many keep their cards close to their chest. I have a feeling no one can truly know before all the votes are cast,” Miranda answered, shaking her head.

“What do you want?”

“Honestly, if I am truthful, the Paths of the Recognized Supremes will probably be best for Haven, considering your presence and just overall what we are going for as a city. We focus on the powerful and the influential, not the masses. Most who want to live in Haven are those who do know their Path already, and those who don’t would probably do best by taking advantage of your Records, or maybe even the Records of Arnold or me,” Miranda answered.

“I have a feeling not many other factions shared this sentiment,” Jake said, shaking his head a bit.

“No, in fact, it was futile to even bring up, so I didn’t. The second best would probably be Unusual Unions based on the general interpretation of it, and that is a fine choice for us. It is also a popular one. It may even be the most popular.”

“So, we voting for it?” Jake asked

“I believe that would be the wisest,” Miranda nodded.

“You talked to the King about it?” Jake then also asked. Hey, a thousand extra votes were always welcome.

“I only heard that he would abstain... Jake, what exactly is your relationship with that... thing?” she asked a bit nervously. “You told me about your Tutorial, and I have put together that was the former King of the Forest, but didn’t you kill him? And if you did kill him, how did he come back to life?”

“Remember that Soul Renewal from the Auction event? Well, the King managed to survive by hiding a bit of his soul within my mask that I got as loot from him, and using the Soul Renewal, I then healed that part to fully revive the King, who has now changed from the King of the Forest into the Fallen King. I am pretty sure the name change is due to some Unique Lifeform stuff,” Jake explained.

“Wait... why would you go so far to resurrect a Unique Lifeform that you have slain prior?” Miranda said as she looked at Jake critically. “The mere fact the King didn’t try to kill you first-thing is already a miracle, and who is to say he won’t try and get rid of you subtly now? Moreover, even if he leaves you alone, what exactly do you have to gain

besides putting an extremely powerful new contender into play on Earth, that may or may not negatively affect Haven and everyone else?”

All good questions Jake honestly had no answer to. He was silent for a bit before answering.

“I did not know about the nobility title before the resurrection, and as for what I get out of it... well, a good fight for one, and as I still have the mask, I made a gamble it would improve the item. Even though it didn’t turn out that way, I don’t regret resurrecting him. I don’t think he is an enemy, let me just say that, as he can’t really kill me or make me too pissed for reasons I won’t share,” Jake just said.

“It was questionable at best,” Miranda just sighed. “You took a massive gamble... wait... the King was resurrected shortly after the Auction, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah?” Jake said.

“How long after?”

“Not that long. It was shortly after I left for the Insect Plains I decided to do it. I did think enough to do it outside the city, and away from any settlements in case things went south,” Jake explained a bit defensively.

Miranda frowned deeply. “That is about the time the Great Famine arrived... could it have been a response somehow to the King’s reawakening? The timing seems too convenient.”

“Great Famine?” Jake asked, a bit confused. He hadn’t heard of this.

“You know, whenever everyone suddenly began to become gluttonous,” Miranda said, making Jake realize what she was talking about.

Now that he remembered... he had never told anyone he did that. Based on Miranda’s words, he also seriously doubted if he should tell anyone he did. Well... anyone besides Miranda and Lillian. Miranda was the City Leader and blessed by those Verdant Witches, and Lillian was bound by a contract, so it was all good, right? Not that he really wanted to explain it

“I may or may not know how it happened...” Jake said a bit meekly as he explained what had happened as he made Cursed Hunger.

Miranda looked at him surprised in the beginning before her surprised face turned into a frowning one before finally looking rather pissed.

“What the hell were you even thinking?” she eventually blurted out when Jake was about done explaining how he had gotten the curse under control. He didn’t go into details, but Miranda clearly knew enough about curses to know how risky it was.

“I was confident I could make it work... and that even if I fucked up, I could handle the consequences,” Jake defended himself.

“Based on what? Pure ego? Jake, that was not risky; that was just downright moronic. The amount of energy in that curse was not something you could have any reasonable confidence level in handling. And then you even decide to seal away a portion of the curse within your own soul... it is just a matter of time before it awakens some kind of ego or basic instinct if you keep in there,” Miranda scolded him.

Now Jake really didn’t want to share Eternal Hunger already had this basic instinct and had taken the form of a chimera within his Truesoul. Though to be fair, that wasn’t Jake’s fault but the Chimera Weapon he had used as a base to fuse the curse into.

“I know it was risky, but I had my reasons to be confident, okay?” Jake said a bit sternly. “While I will admit I did not know the global effects my crafting session would have and that and that large parts of the crafting process were unintentional, I will not apologize for the outcome.”

“What Miranda is trying to say is that your stunt had a negative effect on every single individual and faction on the planet and that if it was discovered you or Haven were in any way involved with it, our diplomatic situation on Earth would become a lot more complicated. Our talks of neutrality would go right out the window as we had effectively just launched unprovoked attacks on every other faction. Intentionally or not,” Lillian said. “And to do something so massive and then not inform us of any of that is a shitty thing to do if you expect us to handle Haven. What if someone knew it was you? In fact, does that Risen Casper not know? He asked how you were doing as if a bit worried just now, and considering his proficiency in curses, it wouldn’t be surprising he put two and two together. Not to mention how your friend Casper nearly got blamed for what you did.”

Jake stood with his mouth open a bit as he took the words in. He wanted to argue but didn’t really come up with any good arguments that wouldn’t make him come off as either an idiot or an apathetic asshole.

“Jake, I don’t care much what you did, but that you didn’t at least inform us you would do it, or even just a quick update after the fact. Even if it hadn’t helped us, it would have allowed us not to spend time and resources trying to discover the source. A single sentence could have saved everyone from a lot of work and even allowed us to potentially help obscure what had happened if someone came close to finding out. I had an idea it was maybe you behind it, but when you never mentioned it made me reconsider. The only thing you told me back then was that you were “handling it” or something to that effect,” Miranda added further.

He felt more and more shitty the further she got. It really felt like he got scolded, and the worst part was that he had fucked up.

The weekly meeting he and Miranda had in the start had stopped all of this from happening. She had always been updated about what he was doing, and Jake had been updated on everything related to Haven. But recently, they had drifted a bit apart, with Jake having so many of his own goals and Jake's presence in Haven no longer being a necessity.

"I fucked up," Jake just recognized. "Sorry... yeah, it just slips my mind. It is no excuse, but I tend to just focus on other things and not even think about informing you unless directly asked or anything like that..."

That they hadn't even talked about the Great Famine properly was an obvious sign of bad communication. Miranda had known a bit, but Jake had been dismissive back then and hadn't wanted to explain as he was busy dealing with the curse. He had just brushed her off to deal with it and then never brought up the topic again, and Miranda had no doubt felt his unwillingness to talk about the topic.

"Would it be possible to reinstate those weekly meetings?" Jake finally asked. "I know it is a bit harder, but if you can contact me with that ritual, can't we set something up? If you need materials to do the ritual, I will naturally cover the cost."

Miranda smiled a bit as she answered: "I think the weekly meetings are a good idea. We can even make them monthly or bi-weekly if we are busy. As for covering costs, those altars from Yalsten more than cover everything."

"We got an agreement then," Jake nodded. "And while we wait for the vote result... let me tell you about the newest drama in the Order of the Malefic Viper."

Jake decided this would be a good time to finally mention one secret he had kept from them both so far: the fact that he had a Bloodline. The entire Order would soon know, and it would be odd for Miranda not to. He would still keep all details a secret, but he did reveal he had one and that it was related to presences. He even used it to explain away a bit of how he controlled the cursed weapon.

She was surprisingly not very surprised. In fact, she said she had already guessed he had something like that, especially as she knew Eron had a Bloodline and that Jake seemed to "get along" well with him, if that was the right phrase.

Overall, Jake realized how dumb it was that they had never actually discussed it before, but it was good to get it all out in the open. She did show quite some schadenfreude when Jake told her about the many people who would be hounding him in the Order but did give him one good piece of advice.

“You need to move the target off your own back, and the fact everyone believes you have a backer is a great way to do that. Just make it clear that you cannot make the decision on your own but need the permission or maybe even command of your mysterious backer. Make it clear that convincing you is a waste of their time and that they should aim to convince the backer instead, as without his involvement, you are unable to choose.”

“But my backer is the Viper...” Jake began as it clicked. “Who no one can discover, and even if they think they find out, they won’t actually believe it possible for the Malefic Viper to be my backer. So I would just put them all on a wild goose chase while everyone else leaves me alone to not further annoy me.”

“Which will at the very least buy you some time until they find out your backer is too hard to find, begin to believe you somehow never had one, or do realize it is the Viper, in which case I am sure you have progressed enough to handle that. I am certain it will leak at some point either way,” Miranda said.

Man, those meetings were going to be a good thing. Jake wanted to ask her about Meira too but was interrupted as the system said they only had a minute left to vote.

“Unusual Unions?” he quickly asked.

Miranda nodded as Jake placed all his votes on it. A minute swiftly passed as the second and only “real” vote of the Second World Congress ended.

**The vote for Paths has concluded!**

**With 32% of the total votes, the chosen System Event is the Paths of the Unusual Unions.**

**The event will begin in 1 month (30 days), and all eligible participants will be invited at that time. Additional information will follow.**

It was short and simple with nothing concrete. A bit like the Treasure Hunt. It seemed that the votes had been damn tight, with the winner only taking 32%. It was clear many factions had tried to go for something else. The overall percentage of actual votes probably also went down due to the King abstaining. Either way, this was not an event Jake would participate in, but the next one sure was.

## **System Announcement**

### **Quest Received: The Call of the Exalted Prima**

**As the world progresses, the Prima Watcher of Earth has been observing. Soon the Seat of the Exalted Prima shall appear on Earth and invite in all those who have managed to form keys to allow their entry. Anyone entering the Seat of the**

Exalted Prima can participate in the Path of Myriad Choices event, as well as gain access to the other benefits offered within the Seat of the Exalted Prima. This content belongs to *novel·fire·net*

However, beware, for the Seat holds dangers that the current warriors of Earth may not be ready to face yet. Should they unleash this danger and come out victorious, it shall reward the entire planet, while should you fail, it may fall to ruin.

The Seat of the Exalted Prima will appear on Earth in three months (90 days). Be prepared.

**Objective: Obtain a Key of the Exalted Prima by combining three Key Fragments of the Exalted Prima.**

**Current progress: 2/3 Key Fragments of the Exalted Prima**

Jake read it over and only thought for a moment before he pulled out two small items he hadn't thought about for a very long time.

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

*Well then, I guess Prima hunting season just started.*

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## Chapter 441: The Right Path

"Do you have any of those keys?" Miranda asked Jake first thing after she had also read the message. It appeared she had gotten the quest too.

"Nope, but I got two fragments, so I think I can get one more quite easily," Jake answered. "But hey, we got the vote we wanted. Well, kind of wanted."

"It is indeed one of the better options, though, to be fair, most would be good options," Miranda nodded approvingly.

"Speaking of options," Jake said as he removed the isolation around their booth to hear all the discussion going around in the hall.

"This is a blatant attempt at forced integration!" someone yelled.

"It says Unusual Unions, not Forced Integrations. A union takes at least two willing parties to function," another guy yelled.

"Mere semantics. Unions can be forced as much as they can be voluntary, and for a union to function, the parties need some level of equality!" the first guy repeated.

"Then work on getting good enough to be recognized as at least worth looking at and stop being shit?" Carmen suddenly joined the discussion.

Jake couldn't help but smirk at the bickering going on. People unsatisfied with the vote appeared to be aplenty, but that only made sense considering the low percentage that the winning choice had. He didn't really bother listening in much, as he noted there was an hour till the Second World Congress would end.

Ten or so minutes more passed with senseless bickering and useless complaining until, finally, the conversation switched a bit towards the quest. It was a quest that it appeared far from everyone had gotten. In fact, it looked like the vast majority of cities had several, if not all members, not receiving the quest based on their confused responses.

As they talked, Jake and a few others made eye contact as they gathered. They had an hour, and the quest contained things that pertained to them all collectively. They decided to gather on the platform of Sanctdomo, and Jake saw that even the Fallen King decided to float down from his mighty booth and join the lower rungs of nobility.

Jake, Jacob, together with Bertram, Fallen King, Carmen, Sword Saint, Casper, and even Eron came together to discuss it. It was the group that had also faced the Monarch of Blood, plus Jacob. Eron looked a bit out of place, too, as he stood as far from the Fallen King as he possibly could, something they all noticed.

*"Relax, human, I do not seek to end your life despite your past transgression of overstepping your boundaries,"* the Fallen King said to Eron, the man freezing up a little. That is when Jake understood why Eron was afraid of the Fallen King. It was the same reason the man didn't want to mess with Sultan... they countered him. The King more than anyone else.

The Fallen King could kill him. Permanently. Jake had theorized Eron more or less had an infinite health pool, but even an infinite health pool wouldn't matter if you had your soul crushed. It was the difference between someone slowly draining the water from a jug and someone just smashing the jug altogether. The King could attack the container of health while everyone else only attacked the inside.

"I apologize for past misunderstandings," Eron said as he bowed. "I misread the situation and allowed curiosity to get the better of me, and for that, I seek your forgiveness."



Jake felt like the apology was a bit out of character. Like it was practiced somehow. However, it appeared the King truly didn't care as he waved his ivory claw dismissively.

*"An action done cannot be retracted, only acknowledged as misguided or wrong. I accept your apology and wish not to dwell on it further than is necessary,"* the King dismissed him outright as the group could finally move on to the real topic at hand.

"So, let's do a tally. How many keys or fragments do you all have?" Carmen asked the group. "I got two fragments."

"One fragment," Bertram said. "Others in Sanctdomo or the Church may have more. We will do a survey when we return."

"Zero fragments or keys," Eron said with a tone making it clear he had never cared about collecting them.

"One key, two fragments," the Sword Saint answered. "I know others in the clan may have a fragment or two more."

"Two fragments," Jake answered, feeling a bit embarrassed answering after the Sword Saint flexed on all of them.

*"One key, zero fragments,"* the King said, making Jake feel even worse. The damn Unique Liveform had gathered more than Jake had in a few months. Damn.

"A single fragment," Caleb said, making him a little happy his little brother hadn't beat him.

"In all cases, it looks like most of us, if not all, are going to attend this event," the Sword Saint said with a smile. "Assuming a few people here can scrounge together the fragments."

The last part was said primarily towards Jake for some reason despite others having less than him.

"I am just wondering," Jacob said, "how many people will each key give access to? Only one seems unrealistic, and an entire city would also be too much."

"Maybe just a party of five? Like a dungeon?" Carmen asked.

"Potentially," Jacob nodded. "However, even that would be low unless this event is truly aimed at the elite and the elite only. Additionally, these creatures with Prima in their name are not that easy to find, but I believe it will be possible to locate quite a few."

That is when Jake realized something. While he had confidence in killing Primas, he still needed to find them. Meanwhile, he had a living cheat in front of him when it came to finding stuff. Something he clearly knew.

"I shall focus my efforts on locating these Primas and ensure that we can get as many keys as possible in the next three months," Jacob smiled. "For all of us. The vote was for us to become an Unusual Union, was it not?"

"And I assume you are doing this out of the kindness of your heart?" Caleb asked with a wry smile.

"Now, while there may be much kindness in my actions, using my divination abilities does not come cheap for me. I simply cannot justify sacrificing for others and burdening my faction without proper cause," Jacob said, returning the smile in kind.

"Man, you remind me of those damn soothsayers on the streets looking for naïve tourists," Carmen commented.

"Except my abilities are real," Jacob answered. "We can discuss potential partnerships for any who wishes to enter one. I will be in Sanctdomo waiting."

"Sure, that sounds like a good idea; let me just enter a city that literally burns me to be within," Casper commented sarcastically.

That turned the mood a bit awkward as Jake learned Risen got burned by entering a holy city. It was almost like those old tropes. "Better avoid holy water," Jake joked.

"Well, yeah, holy affinity liquid does sound an idiotic thing to touch," Casper said with a deadpan face.

"Anyway, it's been nice seeing you all again," Carmen said as she turned to the Fallen King. "Besides maybe you, as I am still not sure if you are some evil entity who plans to lead the world into ruin."

*"I believe such would be meaningless, and I would face all those gathered here, something which I have no interest in doing nor believe is a wise choice. Not that more than the hunter is needed,"* the King answered, not properly getting Carmen was semi-joking.

"Yeah, if he gets out of line, I got this," Jake answered as he gave a thumbs up. "His weakness is so obvious you will all kick yourselves for not realizing it earlier."

"Overwhelming power?" Casper asked.

"That would work," Jake approved.

The mood after that was a bit more relaxed as Carmen left with the former King of the Forest disappearing soon after. Eron left hastily, too, as he still seemed uncomfortable after spending time around the King. Caleb and the Sword Saint also bailed as they had some stuff to attend to, leaving only Jake, Bertram, Jacob, and Casper.

That is when Jacob did something Jake had not seen coming.

“Casper, the Holy Church is going to advocate for the expulsion of the Risen from Earth and not allow them into any kind of unions. It may result in an outright attack with the goal of pushing you off the planet or annihilating you outright,” Jacob said when it was only the four of them.

“Huh?” Casper said, a bit surprised.

“The Holy Pantheon is determined. They place a lot of importance on Earth due to the presence of so many powerful factions here. The Court of Shadows, Valhal, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, someone with a Divine Blessing given by Stormild, another by Aeon, and of course a Transcendent... now also a Unique Lifeform. To give up the planet would be moronic. The Church can accept the presence of all these, but the Risen are the mortal enemies of the Church, and co-existence is not acceptable to the leadership at all,” Jacob explained.

Jake also stood surprised as Jacob just said a lot of things he had not expected to come out of the Augur and leader of the Holy Church on Earth.

“Why are you...?” Casper asked, equally confused.

“Within a system event such as this, we are entirely cut off from the rest of the multiverse. There are no observers, and they have no control over us, so I need to say it here where we can speak truly freely. You need to be prepared, Casper. And while I am the leader of the Holy Church on Earth, I am not the leader of the faction. My protests will do nothing but make me lose influence, and it may even result in losing my position,” Jacob answered.

“Still doesn’t answer why you are telling me all this to begin with,” Casper frowned.

“Because I’m not a complete asshole, and even with my position in the Church, I don’t need to agree with everything that is happening. Publicly I will need to be against the Risen and even lead a campaign against them, but privately I honestly don’t care. In fact, if I actively helped to destroy a friend, that would go directly against my Path,” Jacob sighed. “Casper, you may now be Risen, but you are still a friend and the same lazy employee who spent more time complaining about being unable to get a good date than actually working.”

“Now that is just harsh...”

"You once told me you liked hanging out with Jake because he couldn't get a girl either," Jacob continued.

"Wait, what?" Jake blurted out.

"It wasn't like that! You know I just liked hanging out with someone who didn't always go on and on about their perfect relationships," Casper said, a bit embarrassed.

"Anyway, Casper, I just wanted to warn you. Be ready, for something will come. The Church will likely order assassins soon to go after you and other influential people, spread more propaganda against you, and try to insert people into your cities to cause civil unrest. In fact, many are already in your cities. Once the universe opens up more and people can be brought here, forces will likely descend. Even if it isn't possible to bring outside help, the forces of the Holy Church grow every day," Jacob explained further.

"Will the Church really go to war?" Jake asked. "Don't they fear the consequences?"

"There will be a justification. Perhaps claims they are killing and forcing people to become undead. That they murder the living to fuel themselves. Essentially slander to make the living side against them. At the same time, they assume you and others will stay out of it as the Malefic One never tended to get involved in other conflicts. He isn't involved in the one that is currently going on. As for Valhal and the Court of Shadows, it is entirely possible they will be hired. For Valhal, we just need to hire individuals as mercenaries, and the upper echelon of the Church may negotiate with the Court of Shadows and force your brother to side with us."

Casper looked grave for a moment as he sighed. "Thanks for the heads-up."

Jacob nodded. "Just take care of yourself. Please don't spread anything about our talk. Needless to say, this is not approved by the Church in any way and may even be considered treacherous."

The last part was also partly directed at Jake, and he, of course, nodded. Casper also nodded as he muttered: "Well... I guess I need to speed up that project a bit."

William sat in meditation atop the block of metal as he slowly absorbed the energy within. He was thrown out of meditation and lost his focus when the system message suddenly appeared and informed him that he had just received a quest.

"Master?" he asked as he felt the presence of Eversmile descend upon his mind. It felt like his head was on fire from the pressure, but he resisted and gritted his teeth as his Master spoke.

*"Such an event is not right for you. Seeing a second potential Path will only confuse you and risk making you stray from your current one. The right one. I have said it before, but*

*all these system events are nothing more than distractions that will ruin you down the line. Just keep walking the Path paved before you, and you will find what you seek, my dear disciple."*

William felt the presence disappear again as he breathed out in relief. He tasted a bit of blood in his mouth, and his eyes were red from the stress. Talking with his Master was no easy feat but a necessary one. His Master always gave him advice on what was best for him and had led him towards several opportunities already. Nevermore was just one of many, and when he had stood before the Judge from the Court of Shadows and been superior, it had proven his Path was the correct one. For more chapters visit

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He still didn't know exactly what his Path was or where it would lead him. However, he had not been led astray so far, and Kimmie and little Seo had also been able to live peaceful lives in a small city he had claimed.

Not that there weren't setbacks. Recently the of the Unique Lifeform from their Tutorial had appeared and was close to the area William usually worked in, creating some issues. The monster had dominated a huge region, far larger than he believed humanity knew, and the monsters William had gotten close to were now doubtful if they should also join this Fallen King. While this may be a wrench in the works, William also believed it an opportunity. He and this Unique Lifeform had a shared enemy, after all.

Stretching a bit, he decided to get up from the slab of metal. He needed a few more skill upgrades and to make some more preparations before he was ready to make the final push to C-grade. He had already made so many preparations, and he would have nothing get in his way. Because while William knew little of what Master wanted, he did know that he and Master had one shared goal:

To overcome the karmic curse laid upon William by the one who had slain him.

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## **Chapter 442: Golden Opportunities Only A Moron Would Waste**

Jake spent the rest of the World Congress checking in with the Sword Saint to tell him that Reika was doing fine at the Order and just chatted with a few people. He had expected Arthur to talk to him at some point, but it never happened. Jacob's dad had approached nearly every other faction but had stayed clear of Haven for some reason.

The last five minutes were spent chatting with Miranda as they set up a time for the next meeting. They had to plan it around Jake's lessons and also Miranda's meetings and work. Scheduling was hard work.

As Jake just waited to be transported out, he mentally went over his near-future plans. Participating in the Path of Myriad Choices event was going to happen, so he needed another fragment before that. He also had a current list of classes in the Order he wanted to finish before heading back to Earth.

On that subject, he had to figure out how easy it was to travel back and forth from Earth and the Order, so he would have to chat with Villy about that. As things were currently, he couldn't leave far from Haven if he wanted to be able to return to the Order on short notice, and he naturally couldn't attend classes if back on Earth or make use of other benefits by Order offered. Those teleportation gates in the Order were fancy but not that fancy to work cross-universe.

Hopefully, the Viper would have some convenient method to allow Jake easy travel. His ideal situation would be to be able to both attend lessons he wanted and go to Earth whenever while also being able to leave Haven to head out and hunt. He even had another plan.

Carmen had asked him to help her track down some family members, and while he did want to help, he had little confidence. So... wasn't Prima hunting a good opportunity? He could use the hunting trip to improve his tracking skill and get another Prima under his belt to complete the key. Win-win right there.

With those thoughts, Jake said his temporary goodbyes to Miranda and Lillian. Neil had just been gone and holed up with other space mages with no one daring to interrupt their work.

Thus the World Congress ended, and Jake's vision flashed for a moment as he found himself back on the couch in the living room of the mansion.

"Eik!" he heard a weird yelp as he saw Meira sitting right beside him, having jumped away the moment he teleported back in.

She looked at him in fright before she finally calmed a bit down and got off the couch. "Sir, I did not know you were returning so soon!"

"Pretty sure nobody knew how long it would be," Jake shrugged. To be fair, he had told Meira he would probably be gone for around ten hours as that was how long the First World Congress had taken, so he was back four hours early.

As for why she was sitting on the couch? He wasn't sure. She usually resided in her own residence when preparing for lessons or meditating, and it wasn't like she had any work in the main mansions. Things like cleaning weren't a thing in magical mansions.

“But it is good you are here. Things are ramping up a bit back on Earth, and I will need to return pretty soon, so I will be around less than before,” Jake said. “I still plan on attending some of the lessons, but it will be less. I just need to find a good way to travel back and forth first.”

Meira seemed a bit disappointed but didn't voice her thoughts. “I shall make sure the mansion and the gardens remain in perfect condition so Sir can return at any time without discomfort.”

It was a nice roundabout way for her to say that he should keep coming to the mansion. She also seemed to have one more thought. “Shall I also end my currently planned lessons?”

“No, of course not,” Jake said, shaking his head. “Keep going as before; you have full access. Keep learning and improving as much as you can, okay? Don't worry; I will be sure to check up on you once in a while, and you are also to select new lessons yourself if you run out.”

That is one thing Jake had learned... Meira borderline needed him to check up on her. It wasn't that she wouldn't do any work if he didn't, but that she seemed to have some odd mindset where if Jake didn't see and recognize her results, she didn't make any progress.

Meira nodded enthusiastically at his words as Jake dismissed her with a look they both knew: he was about to talk to Villy, and she didn't want to be anywhere near when that happened due to the god's tendency to descend with mildly alcoholic beverages.

Once she was gone, Jake opened his mouth. “Hey Vil-“

“Sup,” a god popped into existence right in front of him, sitting on another couch - two glasses filled with some weird blue liquid already on the coffee table between them.

“Done the World Congress,” Jake said casually as he gave Villy a quick breakdown of what had happened. How the King had appeared, the vote for no World Leader, and then the second vote and the quest he received right after.

Villy silently listened and nodded along here and there. When Jake finished, the Viper made his thoughts known after getting a quick sip of the drink, Jake mimicking his actions. It tasted a bit of strawberry despite the blue color.

“That no World Leader was elected makes sense, as it would be hard for your planet to select a single uniting leader without a huge war first,” Villy said.

“Just to make sure, you aren't advocating I should take up the position?” Jake asked.



"No, quite the opposite. Doing so would be a waste of time and likely set you down a path where nobility holds a great impact. You will be required to participate in certain things, and while that isn't an issue currently, it would just be an annoyance down the line. You would waste a lot of time on things I know you have no interest in, and for what? To lead a small planet? Even if the influence expands and you take over the galaxy, so what? Become a god, and you can waltz into most empires, kill a god or two, and bam, you own a country larger than the budding kingdom on Earth instantly," Villy shared his thoughts.

"Well, I still kind of care about the planet and have friends and family there," Jake said. "Abandoning them outright is not an option."

"So, just make that known and ensure whoever is in power knows you have that viewpoint and that all hell will break loose if they go after anyone close to you. If push comes to shove, evacuate those you care about. Bring them here or somewhere else of your choosing if the hotly contested territory of Earth isn't worth the real estate. You could then even choose to make Earth an example of what happens when someone makes you an enemy. Quite a common tactic that one," the god explained. "Or, you know, just put someone loyal or at least not antagonistic in charge."

"Sounds like you are suggesting I put in Miranda or the Fallen King," Jake said.

"Or most others, honestly," Villy said. "Not many on Earth view you as an enemy, and the only problem is that many of your friends and family belong to factions that are not exactly on friendly terms. But it is up to you; I have no skin in the game."

"Yeah. I guess I will figure it out," Jake nodded. "So, the system event?"

Villy turned a bit more serious. "This is not a normal event; just know that. The ability to change one's path is not at all simple, and especially the opportunity to experience a secondary one is once-in-a-lifetime. Needless to say, I would heavily advise you to do it; only a moron wouldn't. However, I am also very interested in this Seat of the Exalted Prima."

"How so?" Jake asked. He had just assumed it was some place on Earth that would appear as part of the system event. Maybe some kind of hidden world like Yalsten?

"The Primas existed on Earth from the start. A Watcher of Earth... this feels like part of something bigger. Moreover, I have heard some rumors that other factions have investigated it already and come up short. What little they have found points to this Exalted Prima not being something simple at all, and these Seats of the Exalted Prima are appearing on every planet with sufficient life across your entire universe," Villy explained.

"Is that abnormal? I would reckon system events appear for everyone."

"It is just the entire way it is designed," the Viper shook his head. "A Seat of something is often only the first stage. An introduction of what is to come."

"You sound like you have an idea what it may be all about?" Jake asked.

"I do, but I won't share more than I already have. Just focus on the events as represented and participate in all those you can. All of these system events are golden opportunities to a new universe, and missing even a single one is a huge waste," Villy said.

"I have been thinking," Jake began, "how hard are titles to obtain? I got one from the Tutorial and one from the Treasure Hunt, all giving percentage stat-increases, so won't someone who has done dozens of these events just be downright overpowered for their level?"

"They would be," the Viper agreed as he grinned. "Such as the Chosen sitting right in front of me. You underestimate how hard titles are to obtain. Every single chance to get one is an unmissable event. This even ignores the massive amount of Records associated with every title gained from these events."

"How rare are system events outside of system integrations?"

"Rare, but it, of course, varies. Some are small, some are large, some can be attended at all times, some are time-limited, but most are once-in-forever. Many titles do exist that just give minor benefits with no percentage increases, but perhaps a few stats or other small bonuses. Some titles are gained by everyone, such as the evolution titles and the dungeon-related ones," the snake god said. "Not that it matters much. As you are right now, you are well ahead of the curve, and if you just keep doing as you are right now, you will stay ahead."

"I do feel like my level has stagnated a little, though," Jake admitted. "Many people at the World Congress were catching up."

It was the truth. Especially someone like the King. Jake and the King had been at the same level only a few months ago, but now the Unique Lifeform had him beaten badly. Jake knew the reasons why, as he was shoring up weaknesses and "solidifying his fundamentals," as people kept saying, but it still felt bad.

"You haven't stagnated. Trust me, stagnation is when you stop gaining levels at all, or it becomes difficult and takes a long-ass time for every one of them. Level-up rates also vary. You will come to experience that as you shore up your weaknesses and shortcomings, the levels will come to you faster and easier, and you won't hit a wall. Many of those who rush their levels will hit a wall or end up taking a worse evolution."

"So, you are saying the Fallen King will be in trouble?" Jake asked a bit teasingly.

"Maybe," Villy said, fully serious. "Even a Unique Lifeforms will reach walls and have to overcome challenges. Every evolution is difficult for them, and if they fail to live up to expectations, they will be stuck in their current grades forever. No one has an easy path to godhood; all need to struggle."

Jake sighed. "Guess I do feel a bit better now."

"Ah, but I would advise you to begin to get some levels under your belt. You are so far off stagnation as you are right now that it isn't a worry. While it is true that rushing might bite you in the ass, that will only happen to you if you overdo it. So I think it is time for you to make a push in levels. Meanwhile, I will work on a better solution for when you go to Earth and back here," the Viper said. Jake didn't even have to ask. He had planned on asking for a better teleportation solution, but the Viper clearly inferred this from the talk before.

"One that can work outside of Haven?" Jake asked.

"Well, that is the plan. Your little friend I blessed will need to help, though. I still need that monument as a beacon, so I guess it is time to put him to work again," Villy said with a smirk.

"Wait, what has Chris even been doing all this time?"

"Eh, a bit of maintenance work, I guess? I don't really bother with him," the Viper shrugged. "Jake, after my return, I gave out blessings in the millions. I don't keep track of every minor insignificant character."

"No, I am just saying, the guy was lost, and you put him on a Path. Only feels right to take some responsibility," Jake argued.

"Then bring him to the Order once he is done with his tasks on Earth," Villy just shrugged again. "Here, he can find plenty of things to do. He still needs to remain in your little city for now, but in the future, just bring him along."

"Alright," Jake agreed. Originally he didn't want to bring Chris as he went to do alchemy, but by now, he realized it wouldn't matter. Even as a Builder, Chris could easily find his place in the Order. "Now, with all of that settled, I guess it is time to get some alchemy done."

Jake only had lessons for the next week. After that, he hadn't booked more as he had predicted the World Congress would lead to some changes. Even the ones the rest of this week, he didn't really need to attend. There were so many lessons that it really didn't matter when Jake took them or even if he delayed. He also had infinite Academy Credits, so he didn't care about missing stuff.

"Just one piece of advice," Villy said. "Pay a visit to the Nalkar House."

“The vampires?” Jake asked as he remembered. “The High-tier Token.”

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He instantly took it out as the Viper nodded.

***[High-tier Alchemy Token of the Malefic Order (Legendary)] – A token created by the Order of the Malefic Viper. This token represents a deal made with the Nalkar vampire line to grant a set number of the Nalkar Clan vampires membership to the Order and includes a set number of benefits. This token has never been turned in, and doing so may lead to certain rewards. Gives off an aura that encourages growth in toxic alchemical products.***

“If you are going to do a leveling push, you need materials. You obtained that token yourself, so go use that to exchange it with the Nalkar House. Trust me, they will be more than happy to,” Villy explained as he made a slightly mischievous smile.

Jake suddenly remembered the original plan to use this token when he originally entered the academy as a cover of sorts. It turned out that was utterly unnecessary due to the plans the Viper made and how the Order worked. Jake had just been swept up by everything and completely forgotten it. Reika had obviously forgotten too, making him feel a bit better about it.

“Well, then I guess it is time to visit a vampire house.”

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## Chapter 443: Vampire Visit

Ah, vampires. If any race had been truly marginalized and suppressed throughout the history of the multiverse, it was them. The Risen and Holy Church both hated them, and most humans, elves, and other humanoids also weren't fans due to the racial skills they possessed.

For a good reason too. Vampires had the ability to drain the life force of others. In fact, they had to do this due to a massive drawback associated with their race: the lack of natural regeneration.

Pretty much all other races could live without any kind of sustenance until they died of age after reaching a certain grade. You could put Jake in a box, and he would keep living until he ran out of lifespan. If you took the same box and put a vampire in it, the

vampire would eventually die due to starvation simply due to passive energy expenditure. They did have some racial skills to alleviate this drawback, such as the Eternal Slumber skill, but it wasn't perfect, and there were many times Eternal Slumber truly did turn out to be an eternal rest.

Now, the usual way to drain lifeforce for a vampire was through drinking blood. It was easy and straightforward, but it had the issue of harming the victim that was used as food quite a lot and could easily result in a casualty. Even if the target didn't die, they would lose resources, and continued exposure to vampires would result in a temporary reduction in stats and prolonged periods of weakness. It was like Jake overdrawing his own body with Arcane Awakening except far worse, and often items or extremely skilled and specialized healers were required to fix the ailment.

Jake had already learned all of this during his time in Yalsten, and he had now learned even more by reading a few basic tomes on vampires that were already present in his library. He had even called Meira, who had given him quite the negative input if he said so himself.

"Vampires are always part of powerful families and really ward their legacies and power. They also buy a lot of slaves to use as food and simply for pleasure. The most positive outcome for a slave sent to a vampire house is the vampires liking the taste of their blood and deciding to use them for crafting blood potions. Well, they would also get really lucky and one day become a vampire themselves... if that is even considered a better fate."

So, yeah, Meira wasn't a fan. Yet she didn't seem alarmed or surprised when Jake said he would go and visit the Nalkar House. Jake learned the reason for this was quite simple: there was no way they would ever dare drink a single drop of his blood. No, not because he was blessed by the Viper or had a backer or something like that, but because drinking his blood would be what in the vampire world was known as a very bad time. Find the newest release on ***novel~fire~net***

You see, it turned out that drinking from someone with highly toxic blood courtesy of Blood of the Malefic Viper wasn't the most pleasant experience. It involved a lot of corroded flesh and overall just made the entire action futile as the vampire would lose more blood energy than they would gain.

The exact polar opposite of someone like Jake were slaves or servants bred to be used as food. Viewed as livestock or pets, these people were trained and nurtured all their lives to be valuable blood banks. It was somehow a recognized Path of the system, and they even had skills and professions focused on providing better and more tasty blood while not being susceptible to the weakness after a vampire used them.

For classes, they tended to still have one focused on combat, but nearly always of the physical variety for better stats-distributions. These were also specialized and worked in synergy with vampires, making them potential soldiers.

The classification for these people was Blood Thrall for the weaker and less recognized ones. Blood Servant was then used for the more qualified and influential non-vampires, and finally, the Blood Disciples. Blood Disciples were those who had the potential of joining the main family and becoming vampires themselves.

Jake had decided to read a bit more up on modern vampirism as he didn't wanna go in with knowledge many Eras old from Yalsten. In fact, it was a bit funny to read the books from Yalsten and compare them with more modern ones. One difference was that in Yalsten, merely consuming health potions and potions made with herbs was considered adequate to regenerate blood energy, but in modern times, consuming such potions was only done in combat.

The Path of vampirism was inherently tied to the consumption of blood and life, so to try and substitute it was to stray from that Path. Short-term, it didn't matter, but long term, the effects on Records became significant. Maybe some vampires in Yalsten knew this, as they still kept live humanoids to drink from, but Jake knew only the elite were able to indulge in this. Keeping the fact that using health potions was harmful in the long run secret made sense if the supply was limited and to quell dissent.

Now, needless to say, Jake wasn't a big fan of how vampires did things. He could totally understand why many races and factions distrusted or were outright antagonistic towards a race that literally required the subjugation and consumption of other humanoid races. The worst part was that it had to be humanoid. Beast blood and such only worked for vampiric beasts, and often the best blood was the blood of the race you had transformed from. Human-turned-vampire would do best drinking from a human, and so on and so forth.

At the same time, Jake also saw the vampires take some level of responsibility. One big thing was how few there were, even with their ability to transform others. The Risen more or less had an open-door policy for any living who wanted to become a Risen, but for vampires, it was far different. You had to be part of a family or be hunted down and slain, as they did not want rogue vampires out there. They cared a lot for lineage, and the only way for an outsider to become a vampire was to join the family as a powerful expert deemed worthy or to be a Blood Thrall that managed to climb to Blood Disciple and then be gifted vampirism.

This did result in the average vampire being far more powerful than most other humanoid races, but it also meant they were more restrained and few in number. They were careful and wanted to avoid vampires causing trouble. The vampire families associated with the Order of the Malefic Viper were also incredibly loyal, not a single family having left. Ever.

So, yeah, to conclude, the vampires were truly a mixed bag of evil nature, loyalty, and odd social dynamics where family was everything. That entire thing where only the talented could become vampires also led to every natural-born vampire being the child of talented individuals. The weakest vampires were born at D-grade, the majority in C-



grade, and the Nalkar House, as an example, had four S-grades and dozens of A-grades currently alive. This did not sound like a lot for a “faction,” but one had to remember this was merely a faction connected to the Order and did not contain all Nalkar vampires that existed. They were also just one of six houses.

Anyway, their strength meant they had resources, and Jake needed resources. As he researched them, he also concluded that him going there and receiving benefits would help obscure who his backer was, maybe even making some factions assume the Nalkar House or a member from there backed him.

The way of getting there also wasn't as simple as merely taking a teleportation gate. Jake had to put in a request to be able to enter their area as it was always sealed off, which had given him even more time to consider his approach once he got there.

It had only taken him half a day to hear back and get a positive affirmation that he could come, which also unlocked his token and allowed him to teleport to them. He got no other information besides an approval, and the second he got it, Jake headed off.

He didn't wear his fancy party clothes but stayed in his good old combat outfit. Jake didn't think he would get into a fight, but he wanted to be in what he felt most comfortable with.

Jake used the token on the teleportation wall in his mansion, and after a brief goodbye to Meira, he stepped through, finding himself in an entirely new area. Jake stepped out of a large rectangular monument in the middle of what looked like a city square as he instantly felt hundreds of eyes land upon him.

Through his sphere, he spotted dozens of individuals staring at the newcomer. All of them were either elves, humans, a few beastkin, and some mixed races. Compared to everywhere else in the Order, there was a distinct lack of any scalekin. No vampires either.

All of the people around him looked relatively normal, and the entire area seemed like the outer area of a large medieval city. The only thing really distinguishing this place from anywhere else was the oddly familiar sky. It was red, and something that looked like the Blood Moon the Monarch of Blood had summoned using the divine artifact hung in the sky above.

Before Jake had any time to figure out where to go now, a dark red swirl appeared in front of Jake as a humanoid form condensed from mist. It was a young man that looked about Jake's own age with black hair and one of those slightly androgynous yet also often considered handsome faces. However, the most striking feature was the two red eyes that met Jake.

**[Vampire – lvl ???]**



It was undoubtedly a C-grade, and Jake had a feeling that he was not a weak one either. The vampire looked at Jake briefly before smiling, revealing his fangs. "Welcome to our humble abode, Hunter. I am Alcor, and I am to act as guide without you becoming too uncomfortable."

The moment the vampire had appeared, Jake felt all the people observing back away while bowing deeply. The vampire Alcor didn't even recognize their existence but just looked at Jake. The vampire also let his aura really go off, as if trying to assess Jake.

"I would sure hope for a pleasant stay," Jake smiled in response, not getting intimidated.

"Then it seems my job will be easier. Now follow me; the Patriarch is ready to see you," Alcor said as he opened his hand to reveal a rune of blood that then conjured a frame of red mist, where the center of the frame took on a mirror-like surface before it condensed into a gate.

Jake looked at the spooky-looking mirror portal for a moment before stepping through. He felt no sense of danger from it, and quite frankly, the C-grade wouldn't need to use weird tricks if he wanted to kill Jake.

The other side of the portal revealed a giant, fully furnished hall, and Jake instantly felt dozens of auras far more powerful than himself. At least twenty C-grades, and one that was far above anyone else present. Below a god... but not by far.

Jake turned and looked at the figure, who gave off an aura that seemed to almost tinge the very atmosphere around him red.

He looked a lot like Alcor but was middle-aged and wore an old-timey suit. He had a well-kept beard and the same deep red eyes. The vampire was currently sitting on a large lounge chair with two barely-dressed women standing at his side – an elf and a human, both C-grade.

"Hunter... what a peculiar name, but not one chosen out of pure hubris, I believe," the vampire said in a deep tone as he got up and began walking towards Jake. "All wish to be the hunter in any situation, but never the prey. And as you stand here, I come to believe that you do indeed adopt this trait, at least in concept. Immune to presences of those stronger... unwilling to recognize himself potentially a prey before a predator. You are a hunter indeed, with all the bravado that comes with it, young Bloodline Patriarch."

Jake looked at the vampire, who stopped right in front of him. He was a good head taller than Jake and looked down at him, as he too was feeling Jake out, just as his junior had done mere minutes ago.

"You seem to have done your research," Jake said, as he clearly didn't need to explain who he was. When he had sent his message to the Nalkar House, he had only informed them that he had obtained an old item related to their lineage and the Order. He had not

gone into any specific details, but it was evident that they had looked into him before inviting him over.

"I do appreciate the luck involved in me living through the phase of a new integration. Always such an exciting time bringing about change like never before. The Order itself has changed more than thought possible with the return of the Malefic One. A truly momentous and equally surprising event, do you not agree?" the vampire said with a searching tone while also taking a few steps back and walking towards his seat.

Jake felt the subtle waves of mental energy in the air, ever so slightly affecting Jake, but more than that, reading him. He only felt them due to how on alert he was and his sphere, making it clear the vampire had no intention of revealing his actions.

Alcor, the young vampire, also just stood silently back with his head lowered, same as everyone else.

"I don't believe many would call the return of a Primordial anything less than momentous," Jake just answered.

"But not surprising?" the vampire said with an inquisitive look.

"Of course it was, but why would it be more surprising than other events? We natives of new universes know nothing of the rest of the multiverse upon integration. The mere existence of gods was a massive surprise," Jake again answered, speaking only the truth. Something the vampire recognized as he nodded.

"Perhaps as difficult as it is for me to recognize the possibility of a creature not living with the system," the vampire sighed. "I am Fairleigh, current Patriarch of the Nalkar House. I do believe we skipped the formal introduction, did we not? Now tell me, Hunter the hunter, what is it you bring from your nascent universe you claim is related to my lineage?"

Without any further ado, Jake pulled out the High-Tier Alchemy Token of the Malefic Viper. Fairleigh looked at it deeply for a few moments before he sighed.

"Such items truly belong in the annals of history. They come from a time when we vampires were on our way to becoming a truly multiversal force. Able to stand toe-to-toe with the Holy Church and the Risen. Yet it is also a reminder that the Malefic One and his Order were our allies even in those times," the vampire said with a melancholic tone. "Where did you acquire it?"

"During a system event, I went to a world once known as Yalsten. An old hidden world once inhabited and ruled by vampires. It had been destroyed due to its isolation, but the system does as the system does and brought back Yalsten of many, many eras ago," Jake answered truthfully. "I found this specific token in a vault set up by the Nalkar of Yalsten, one created with the hope of passing down some of their treasures. When I got

the treasure, I was asked by a projection left behind to have positive inclinations towards the Nalkar, so here I am.”

“A hunter that also keeps his word, it seems. Very well, if you treat me with honesty, I shall return the favor. Now tell me, what is it you desire of us in exchange for an old relic of the past?”

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## Chapter 444: The Sentiment of Vampires

Jake had many questions and doubts as he stood before the vampire. First of all, why was the Patriarch of the Nalkar Family there, and not just some lower-level leader? Heck, why was there a leader to begin with? Even if Jake assumed the vampires just placed a lot of importance on history and lineage, this still seemed like overkill.

Based on the line of questioning, it was possible they suspected him of being more than he represented himself as. The poking into his views on the Viper’s return seemed very deliberate, as if they wanted him to reveal something, but even that made little sense. If Jake was the Chosen, would using lie-detection and trying to make him reveal his identity be a smart choice and not just one that would piss him off?

No matter the case, the Patriarch was willing to negotiate, and he did seem interested in the Alchemy Token.

“An old relic perhaps, but still one that would be honored,” Jake answered. “The Order of the Malefic Viper would undoubtedly adhere to its promise, making it more than just an interesting trinket.”

“While true, we do not need such a token to enter the Order anymore. It was of a time when we Nalkar were spread all over the multiverse, and to enter the Order was a sign of success. Now, all the Nalkar able to join are all members already, making the primary function of the token null,” Fairleigh said.

Jake couldn’t really argue with the fact that they could enter without the token, but he still knew the vampire wanted it. The current act of downplaying the value of the Alchemy Token was only proof to Jake that the Nalkar were interested. If they weren’t, why bother and not just buy it cheaply and be done with it, and if Jake refused, then just tell him to bugger off? At least, that is what Jake was banking on.

“In that case, perhaps it would be better to save it and find Nalkar unassociated with the Order,” Jake sighed as he faked disappointment.

Fairleigh looked at Jake and smiled. “Please, let us stay in the realm of honesty. While that was no outright lie, we are both aware of the value such an item holds to my family. Even if it is not purely based on the benefits it offers, but the sentimental value. In fact... come, let me show you something.”

Jake couldn't even resist as he was forcefully teleported and appeared within a massive chamber of sorts. On a second look, it reminded him more of a museum, with glass containers and complicated magic arrays guarding many mundane items spread throughout.

“Remembering history has always been important to our kin. Perhaps we merely enjoy living in the glory of the past, or maybe it is a way to not repeat our mistakes. Either way, we preserve, and we collect. That token you hold may not be a treasure to most, but to us, it is invaluable,” Fairleigh explained.

Looking around, Jake saw a lot of rather, well, boring items. One area had a dining set sealed away, another section was filled with old paintings and pictures, and a third was bookshelves stacked upon bookshelves with old books in them.

“We have items from all eras, even some from before our fall. In fact, we value anything from before then, as it speaks of what once was, and the Records it contains matter. Perhaps not to you or anyone else not of our lineage, but to us, there is power in history,” he continued his explanation as he went over and pointed out what looked like a fountain pen.

“This pen was used by a scholar of the sixth Era to write letters back to his family. It managed to reach epic rarity back in the day but has returned to a mundane item after this long. Items such as that Alchemy Token have yet to return to mundanity but still contain such powerful Records, making it even more valuable.”

Jake nodded along as he couldn't help but think about the ludicrous amount of resources expelled by that one chamber he was in. It was humongous, larger than any museum Jake had ever seen or heard of on Earth. At the same time, it was incredibly densely packed, with every single item sealed away with incredibly powerful and intricate formations. These formations were able to freeze time itself for the item and allow them not to turn to dust through the passage of time.

“Tell me, do you find our obsession with the past foolish?” the vampire finally asked him.

“No, not really,” Jake shrugged. He had never been the type himself to collect old antiques or care much for cultural inheritances, but he knew it was a perfectly normal hobby. “Even on my planet before the system arrived, we collected pieces of history, families had heirlooms they warded with their lives, and I know of at least one old man

who picked up an old heirloom his clan possessed and turned it into a monstrous weapon.”

“But you seem to not personally share the sentiment?” Fairleigh asked once more.

“No,” Jake shook his head. “While I do understand placing sentimental value on objects, I rarely do it. Not that I entirely avoid it... I still have the first potions I ever crafted stowed away, and all the equipment I wear I earned myself one way or another. I do value these items more than they are necessarily worth and value some more than others, but that is due to the story of how I got them.”

The vampire nodded. “An understandable view for a hunter. Now tell me, what kind of compensation are you seeking in return for the token? It cannot merely be the extra alchemical ingredient associated with enrollment. If it was, you would have no need to come here.”

“I am in need of alchemical ingredients of higher value, most specifically ones of the hemotoxin nature,” Jake said. Vampires were damn good at hemotoxins. A massive surprise that vampires, wielding blood magic and using blood energy, were good at blood poisons.

“And?” Fairleigh asked.

Jake took out his second item as he revealed his necklace by un-fusing it from his body and holding it up. “I need this improved. I know the Nalkar Family have long been part of the Order, so I assume I am correct when I believe you can do this?”

***[Prodigious Alchemist's Necklace of Holding (Epic)] - An amulet awarded to a prodigious young alchemist upon completion of a trial. An ornate creation of high craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a spacegem in place. Allows the user to store items in a small pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side-effects in temporal suspension. Enchantments: Alchemist's Spatial Storage. +25 Wisdom. Requirements: Soulbound***

It was Jake's first piece of epic equipment and probably still one of his best items to date. By sheer usefulness and convenience, it was at the top as nothing beat spatial storages. However, Jake was also acutely aware that the item had fallen off big time. The stats it gave were great when Jake was level 26, but now? Now they were irrelevant.

He could probably have gotten a better spatial storage, probably even one with the same Alchemist's Spatial Storage enchantment. Maybe not as good, but at least close. It had to be noted that each person could only hold one spatial storage item under normal circumstances, so Jake couldn't have swapped for another without choosing to “unbind” his Prodigious Alchemist's Necklace of Holding. Now, even if it was Soulbound,

this wouldn't destroy the item but just make it completely inert. Of course, it would still be Soulbound, as one cannot get rid of that connection without breaking the item altogether.

So yeah, maybe him holding onto it was for purely sentimental reasons. Jake had to admit he had briefly considered if upgrading the item was even worth it, but...

"How exquisite," Fairleigh said as he looked at the necklace. "Truly ancient craftsmanship, incredible attention to detail, and that stone used... I am amazed someone would choose to give that to someone of such a low grade."

Even if the vampire could not see the description, he was still an ancient vampire in S-grade. He looks at it a bit more before nodding. "Finding a suitable crafter should be possible; we have some very talented jewelers among our ranks. Do note that unlocking the full potential of the gem will not be possible with your current strength and the necklace being Soulbound."

Jake nodded. "Just seeing it improved is all I hope for. Also, just to check, I want to make sure there are no risks of breaking it if I choose to improve it?"

Fairleigh smiled as he chuckled. "If I can find a D or C-grade capable of breaking that item, we would have our new Patriarch or Matriarch in the making. You seem to not fully comprehend. That item was made by someone far above C-grade and was then directly modified by the system to be in its current form, sealing away the Records and power within. An incredibly rare thing that is not worth doing. These items can also only be obtained from system events. Well, in your case, I assume it was a Tutorial Challenge Dungeon?"

Jake nodded once more. "Yeah, I was lucky to find one associated with alchemy and got this at the end."

"Just alchemy?" the vampire asked inquisitively.

"More or less," Jake said, shutting down the topic.

Fairleigh smiled again as he took out a token. A moment later, he dispelled it again. "The young lad who brought you here has been tasked with fetching a suitable jeweler I have in mind. Now tell me, you went to a realm known as Yalsten? I must confess it is not a name I am familiar with, but we had many such worlds back then, and if it was hidden as you claim, it was customary to keep it secret to limit leaks. Did you happen to obtain any valuables from there besides this token? One's related to our race?"

That is when Jake remembered. During all of his fights with the Counts of Blood, Jake entered their chambers. All of them had been preserved and filled to the brim with valuable-looking and expensive objects. Furniture, paintings, candle holders, chandeliers, pretty much all of the fancy stuff the Yalsten vampires loved. For some



reason, Jake had decided to just gather all of the fanciness because why the hell not? He needed furniture for back home, and it looked good. Now, that seemingly random choice appeared to have been an unexpectedly wise one.

Jake waved his hand as a dining table appeared in front of him together with eight chairs to go with it.

Fairleigh looked at it as his eyes opened wide. "This... did you obtain this in Yalsten too?"

"Yeah," Jake answered. "It was in a chamber of sorts that looked to have been preserved."

"This dining set dates back dozens of Eras... as old as the token?"

"It is at least from before the eighth Era," Jake said. Based on the Monarch of Blood, the Viper had not gone into isolation yet when Yalsten fell, and Jake knew Villy had done that during the seventh Era. So, naturally, this item had to stem from before then.

"Truly?" Fairleigh asked. "I will have to have a chronomancer confirm the exact age, but we would be more than willing to buy this set if you are correct. We would naturally pay handsomely."

"I got more," Jake said, not wanting to miss the opportunity.

"Oh?" Fairleigh exclaimed, letting a bit of excitement leak out. "Can you show me?"

Jake looked a bit around and noticed how most of the floor space was already filled.

"We're gonna need a bigger room."

Vilastromoz was busy as always, multitasking doing all sorts of important things. Having your mind split and being in many places at once was helpful, but he nearly always kept one part of himself reserved on observation duty, also known as Jake-watching.

However, today he wasn't alone. And no, it was not Duskleaf visiting either.

"Katherine, I do wonder why you don't simply choose to reveal your presence to your kin," the Viper said to the woman sitting with him, sipping on a wine glass filled with a red liquid a bit too red to be wine.

"I will in due time, but not now. I am more intrigued by your choice of Chosen. I have been observing, but so far, I truly cannot see why you have picked him. His Bloodline does seem peculiar and powerful, but even if it was utterly monstrous, I see little reason to bless a lowly F-grade as you did and not wait for him to at least reach B or A-grade.



The chance of him dying without giving a return on investment would be far lower if that was the case,” the vampire goddess said.

“Are you questioning my decision-making skills?” Vilastromoz turned and asked her with a raised eyebrow.

“No, of course not; I am merely perplexed and unable to comprehend the reasoning behind the choice,” she quickly backtracked. Failing to realize the reaction she just had was a big part of the reason why Vilastromoz liked Jake. He would have remarked that the Viper did have a shitty track record and probably even included a self-deprecating joke about how the Viper had fucked up by blessing him.

“Keep trying to comprehend. I personally fail to comprehend your sense of secrecy, but then again, I guess you would prefer not to get tracked,” the Viper shrugged.

Katherine, also known as the True Ancestor of the Nalkar lineage, was the most powerful vampire of the Nalkar-line. Sanguine had experimented much to make different kinds of vampires, and Katherine was the first vampire of the Nalkar line that ascended to godhood, giving her the title of True Ancestor. She wasn’t actually the first Nalkar vampire, but many believed she was - it was that kind of rumor that appeared and that no one bothered to correct.

She had left during the seventh Era to protect her kin elsewhere as those that remained in the Order were safe due to the presence of Snappy. Back then, they had not been official parts of the Order but were more like the local branches of Dragonflights. Closely tied to the Order, but not members. Something that, in retrospect, probably turned out to be a mistake. Once Sanguine fell, the vampires were unassociated with any factions and couldn’t decide on joining one but tried to stay independent. By the time they realized they had needed to be part of something bigger, Vilastromoz had already entered isolation.

Today, Katherine and many other vampires, including the closest thing the vampires had to a pantheon, now resided in a hidden realm that not even Vilastromoz knew where was.

The Holy Church and Risen didn’t know either, as if they did, the Viper reckoned they would have already attacked. These vampires had nothing to do with the Order and were not at all under its protection.

This leads to the question of why Katherine had visited and the old snake god had his suspicions. A suspicion that would prove correct as the vampire spoke.

“What are the future plans of the Malefic One? I am aware that the True Ancestor of the Balnar lineage has already made contact, but so far, he is tight-lipped. We are aware of the movements that have recently been happening, and the council has had discussions but has yet to-”

“Ask the real question,” Vilastromoz interrupted as he looked at her sharply.

“Is the stance of the Malefic One the same as it was back then?” she asked.

“Have I ever said otherwise? When did my word stop mattering?”

He smiled as Katherine finally asked. “Will the Malefic One allow the six clans to fully join the Order of the Malefic Viper?”

“Five clans,” Vilastromoz corrected. “The Balnar have already sworn fealty.”

Katherine looked surprised before she stood up and bowed. “Then may the Nalkar be the second clan to do so. I shall return to the council and relay the information.”

“Just a second,” Vilastromoz said as he raised a hand. “How many of you are there now?”

“A hundred and eleven, including us six True Ancestors,” she answered.

“Not bad, more than one an Era,” Vilastromoz nodded. “Bring them all before me, and we can continue this conversation.”

“As you command,” Katherine nodded enthusiastically.

Vilastromoz watched as she disappeared and smiled a bit to himself. Yet another batch of gods was ready to join him. He knew the vampires had struggled for many Eras and had latched onto him as a lifeline. In fact, he felt like the entire multiverse was much more consolidated into enormous factions than back in the day. So, perhaps it wasn't too stupid for the Order to also become more than it had always been. To truly expand it and make it into a multiversal force to be reckoned with. A faction that controlled territory and dominated more than just a few small pieces of land spread throughout the multiverse for their small branches. Find the newest release on *novel✕fire✕net*

Adding nearly every vampire left in the universe to his faction would be a good start. Of course, the Holy Church, Risen, and probably a few dozen if not hundreds of factions wouldn't approve. This was why no faction had ever allowed them to join them despite their relative strength.

Sadly for them, Vilastromoz didn't really give a shit.

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## Chapter 445: Vampire Hoarders

"This one too?" a large vampire asked as he lifted a coat hanger very carefully.

"Definitely that one," Fairleigh said as he nodded.

"Where to stash the tablecloths?" another vampire inquired.

"Set the tables like they used to be on the seventeenth picture."

"Understood," the attendant said as she began carefully using telekinesis to move the tables and chairs into their exact positions, as shown in some old picture. A second vampire joined in only to double-check all the dimensions and distances were absolutely correct. A third came to put down the forks, knives, smaller forks, tiny spoons, large spoons, medium spoons, and all kinds of the different and utterly superfluous fancy-ass tableware.

Jake just stood back as he watched all of this happen. At first, he had just thought the vampires were eccentric collectors of old items, but by now, he realized... they were just straight-up hoarders. Organized hoarders with relatively fastidious taste, but hoarders nonetheless.

Fairleigh, the S-grade Patriarch, even personally chose to oversee as the many vampires worked to recreate a dining hall exactly as it was shown in one of the pictures Jake had found. It wasn't even something from a painting, but a picture in a book on proper table manners.

Not that Jake chose to complain. In fact, currently, he was just waiting for the jeweler to arrive along with his agreed-upon goods being collected and prepared for him. The Alchemy Token had somehow ended up not even being that big of a deal. The paintings of old vampires from Yalsten, the books from the library telling their history, and the many random items Jake had swiped turned out to be far more valuable in the eyes of the vampires.

The reason for this was ultimately simple. The Alchemy Token was not truly an item of the Nalkar vampires but merely a gift they received from the Order. It was an item nearly identical to many tokens still created today and had little to do with the culture and history of the vampiric race.

Jake couldn't help but consider what would have happened if he had shown up with the divine artifact the Sword Saint had gotten. In some ways, he was actually happy he hadn't gotten that necklace as he feared the level of insanity these vampires would show upon seeing it.

The negotiation process had already been a lot as-is, and Jake had no idea if he got scammed. Though, to be fair, he felt like he was the scammer, selling off old furniture and mundane items he had no use for and would probably just have given away or used for a fun-time bonfire or something.

After looking on a bit longer, Fairleigh finally turned to him. "I just got word the crafter is ready to help with the necklace. Are you prepared to leave, or do you wish to stay and observe the recreation some more?"

"Upgrading the necklace takes priority," Jake said, not having the heart to tell the ancient vampire that he really didn't want to see a group of powerful vampires set a table as if their lives depended on it.

"Very well," the Patriarch said, looking only slightly disappointed as he teleported the both of them.

They appeared in what looked like an area of the city Jake had first arrived in. Except this place was clearly part of the commercial district as Jake stood before a massive shop.

That C-grade vampire that initially brought him to the Patriarch was already there waiting. The Patriarch gave the young lad a nod before he teleported away, leaving Jake with the vampire called Alcor.

The vampire seemed a lot more respectful now than the last time they met as he motioned for Jake to follow. "Please follow me; the mistress has already prepared all the suitable materials for the crafting session."

Jake nodded as he was led into the shop. He noticed how the street was devoid of people, and Alcor clearly noticed his confusion. The only people he saw were himself, Alcor, and a single other person currently within the shop.

"We cleared out the area in preparation for your visit to not have any of the livestock gawking during the crafting session and to avoid disturbances," Alcor explained nonchalantly.

"Livestock, huh," Jake just commented.

"I am aware they can be annoying, but sadly, they are necessary," Alcor sighed, clearly not understanding Jake's comment.

"You know," Jake said just as they entered the shop, "I once fought what happens when livestock reaches a breaking point and gets the power to resist and fight back. It doesn't turn out pretty for the oppressors."

He was clearly talking about the Minotaur Mindchief. The circumstances back then had been very different, and Jake would argue the vampires were running a far greater risk. Then again, what the hell did he know? The vampires had managed to persist for Eras.

"I think it can turn out quite well," he heard a female voice say as the woman within the shop regarded them. "I didn't kill anyone when I received the gift. I did have a few who needed to be put in their place, but now we are all family."

Jake looked over and saw a female vampire standing there to welcome them. She had long black hair, the usual red eyes, and the equally commonplace beauty he had come to expect from all vampires. In fact, all vampires he had ever seen took the whole "look better with every evolution" concept to an entirely new level.

Not that she wasn't more than just pretty to look at. While she didn't feel that powerful, Jake still felt a strong aura, making him relatively certain right off the bat that she was a pure crafter. One at the cusp of C-grade.

### **[Vampire – lvl 199]**

As for the words she spoke?

"I take it you were a Blood Disciple?" Jake asked her.

"Correct," she said, clearly showing pride at that fact. It was probably for a good reason, too, if she had managed to get recognized and become able to become a vampire through her own efforts. Considering she was the jeweler Fairleigh had brought her to see, he didn't doubt that she had been recognized and been given "the gift" through merit.

"This is Mistress Rubylake, one of the most talented jewelers of this generation," Alcor introduced her. "And yes, she was formerly a human but has since ascended."

"Ascended is a strong word," Jake just commented again as he shook his head. Insulting the jeweler he wanted to help him probably wasn't a good idea, so he cut it out there. Instead, he just took out his necklace and presented it to the woman called Rubylake. Jake assumed it was some kind of title or maybe just the naming convention of where she came from.

"This is the necklace in question," Jake said as her eyes were already trained on it.

"May I look at it closer? I only got descriptions, so I will need to inspect it myself to see if I believe I can do the job," she asked.

Jake nodded and handed it over. He felt his connection to it slightly fade as it left contact with his body, making him unable to use the spatial storage. He still had the stats, but he innately knew he needed to touch the necklace to use the storage.

Rubylake looked at the necklace as she took out some weird box. She placed it inside as she began infusing blood energy into it. She looked almost in a trance as she sometimes nodded, other times frowned, and finally looked elated.

"This item... it qualifies!" she said with extreme delight. Alcor, standing with Jake, also smiled from ear to ear.

"Congratulations, mistress," the male vampire said.

"Qualifies for what?" Jake asked, being more than a little confused. He assumed it was good, but he was more wondering that she didn't mean that *she* qualified, but that his necklace qualified for some mystical objective.

"Apologies," Rubylake said. "This item qualifies for my Evolutionary Quest, and I just failed to hold back my excitement. I have been looking for an opportunity for a few years while making preparations for this day."

*"Villy... what the hell is an Evolutionary Quest, and please don't tell it is something incredibly basic and common knowledge I have somehow entirely missed?"* Jake quickly asked the Viper mentally as he had a strong feeling asking the vampires would make him look like a moron.

*"Gotta do some questing to advance to C-grade along with usual requirements. This is indeed pretty basic knowledge, so basic that no one actually bothers writing about it, and the quests are individualized, so it isn't like telling people about it matters. You will learn more about it later, so stop worrying your pretty little head about it and instead get that bling upgraded. Maybe she can turn it into a giant gold chai-"*

Jake began ignoring Villy as he followed suit in congratulating her, not wanting to look like an ignorant idiot. Or a rude one. "Congratulations are in order, then."

"Thank you. It is still a bit premature as I have yet to succeed, but I have a high level of confidence. Now, Do you have any questions? Don't worry, there are no requirements of you besides allowing me to modify the Soulbound item," Rubylake asked.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment. He was aware that as it was a Soulbound item, Jake had to give consent before any modification could take place. He was ultimately still the master of the item, and he merely allowed another outside force to modify and hopefully improve it.

"How long will it take?" Jake finally asked.

"I should be able to do it within a day, maybe one and a half days. I have made too many preparations, and the magic circle is already fully charged... if I take any longer, it will likely result in failure," she honestly answered.

“What are you planning on doing, if I might ask? If you won’t answer, it is fine. Trade secrets and all that,” Jake asked further.

“No, I will gladly explain. My primary objective is to awaken the Space Heart – the name of this type of Spacegem used. Currently, only a small part of the full space is utilized, and its powers are generally sealed. Once I awaken it, I can pull on the Records and energy to forge and awaken latent energy in the rest of the necklace, and while there will probably be no cosmetic changes, the item will improve significantly if I succeed. Just so you are aware, I aim for a legendary rarity for my own quest. It is not a true craft, but to perform an upgrade at this level of complexity should qualify,” Rubylake explained.

Jake nodded in understanding. “I assume you will want peace and quiet during the crafting process?”

He knew he tended to want to be left alone while crafting.

“That would be preferable. However, I will need you to still stay close. There is a waiting room next door you can choose to stay in, but as long as you stay within a kilometer or so, it should be fine.”

Nodding once more, Jake decided to just go next door as he would also wait for something else: his alchemy ingredients.

He said his goodbyes and was led by Alcor into the building next door. It was a large lounge room with not a single other person in sight. There was still no one within his sphere either. As he was next door, he could still see into the store of the jeweler. She had gone down to the cellar and activated a lot of wards and formations to hide, but of course, none of that mattered to Jake’s Bloodline-powered Sphere of Perception.

Jake saw her carefully place the necklace on an alter as she prepared several ingredients in a magic circle around it. He looked on a bit more before he stopped, choosing to respect her privacy. He also had no idea what she was doing.

Ten minutes or so passed, with Jake just entering meditation. Alcor was not talkative either but just quietly stood in a corner with his eyes closed, waiting. After those ten minutes, Jake spotted movement outside the building as he saw Fairleigh appear, holding two crystals in his hands.

Fairleigh entered as Jake looked up, identifying the two crystals before the old vampire walked over and had a chance to speak.

***[Alchemist’s Bloodgem Spatial Storage (Rare)] – A gem containing a spatial storage that is especially suited to any blood-affinity herbs and natural treasures. The energy of the gem is slowly leaking, giving it a severely limited lifespan.***



***[Memory Crystal (Common)] – A crystal containing infused information.***

One was a gem no-doubt containing all the herbs and such they had agreed upon. The other was something a bit more unexpected, and Fairleigh quickly explained.

“I took the courtesy of creating a Memory Crystal from the input of a talented alchemist from the family who is specialized in hemotoxins. It contains his insights into the agreed-upon materials as well as some tips and tricks. I hope this addition is a welcome one,” the vampire said with a smile.

“And, of course, the ingredients you requested. It took quite a dive into the gardens to find them all, especially in such quantities and all suitable for D-grades, but we managed to do so. I once more took a bit of liberty and placed them within this Bloodgem for you to transport the ingredients while making sure they lose none of their potency. It is far worse than a true Alchemical Spatial Storage, but it will make do. Just know it will only last a few more decades.”

Jake nodded in acknowledgment.

“I have no plans of taking that long before using the ingredients. The crystal is also more than welcome,” Jake said. The vampires had treated him pretty nicely so far, even if they did have some inherent cultural issues.

“Now, I would offer you one more thing, but I guess I already know your answer?” Fairleigh asked in a not very hopeful tone.

“No, I have no interest in becoming a vampire,” Jake shut it down.

“A shame. Truly a shame. You would fit right in,” Fairleigh sighed but was not truly disappointed. Clearly had had low or no expectations to begin with.

“Why would you reject such an offer?” Alcor suddenly butted in, genuine confusion in his voice. “Would it not be purely better? It would allow you to only focus on either a class or a profession without sacrificing strength, solidifying your Path.”

“Child,” Fairleigh said as he turned to Alcor. The young vampire froze in fear as Jake felt a bit of bloodlust leak out of the old vampire. “When a gift is rejected, you graciously accept the other party’s decision. Anything else is unacceptable. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes... Patriarch,” Alcor said, barely getting the words out as he looked like he could barely breathe.

“Temper your arrogance,” Fairleigh sighed. “We vampires are not necessarily superior. No enlightened race is. For all, vampirism is a choice, and if the hunter does not deem

vampirism part of his Path, we should never claim to know better or falsely believe ours more powerful.”

“I understand,” Alcor repeated as he stared down at the ground. Jake, however, felt that the guy didn’t entirely agree. Follow current NOVELS on *novel•fire•net*

“Enough of that,” Fairleigh said as he smiled again and sent the crystal and Bloodgem floating towards Jake.

Jake caught them both and didn’t hold back as he inspected the spatial storage gem, a large smile forming on his lips.

He was about to have a *bloody* good crafting session.

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## Chapter 446: Heart of the Alchemist

Jake had asked for alchemical ingredients with hemotoxin properties as well as those with blood affinity. Most blood affinity ingredients were easily translated into products with hemotoxin properties, making it an ideal material to use. The other function of the blood affinity was in Blood Potions which vampires very much enjoyed. As well as quite a lot of beasts that could actually use them as natural treasures to gain experience and levels.

This led to the vampire clans cultivating these herbs in spades. Hemotoxin was also a preferred poison of the vampires as it synergized with many of their skills. An ability that thinned the blood of a foe and made it more difficult to control one’s vital energies just worked incredibly well with blood magic for rather obvious reasons.

So Jake had high expectations. He had asked for the good stuff but had not been overly specific besides mentioning a few herbs he knew he wanted. Jake was not foolish enough to believe Fairleigh wouldn’t know better than himself, and Jake was also confident in the vampire not wanting to scam him too much. Even if he scammed Jake a little, it would be fine as Jake already felt like a scammer after pawning off so much useless shit from his spatial storage.

However, when he peeked into the gem, he realized he had indeed miscalculated: those damn vampires valued their old antiques more than he had believed. There were fifteen different kinds of herbs and natural treasures, with six of them at rare rarity or above. All of them were exactly the kinds he had hoped, and more surprisingly, Jake

actually knew about all of them from prior research and the classes he had taken on hemotoxins. Well, it probably shouldn't be that surprising, considering the vampires were a major supplier of hemotoxin materials for the Order.

Looking at these six high-value items, Jake was very pleased as he quickly scanned through them.

***[Crimsonwood Ash (Rare)] – Ash of a burned Crimsonwood. Even if much of the potency has been lost, the ash still contains some qualities of the Crimsonwood. If the ash is inhaled, it will enter the bloodstream and cause internal damage as it binds with the blood of its victim, making it incredibly difficult to dispel. If too much is inhaled, the individual will combust, spreading even more ash.***

Jake had read a lot about Crimsonwood Trees. They were an entire categorization of trees, but this one came from one of the more valuable types. The Blood-Combusting Crimsonwood was a tree that quite literally set itself on fire to spread its deadly ash and kill everything within huge areas around it. The weaker ones could level entire ecosystems, while the more powerful Blood-Combusting Crimsonwoods were known to wipe out all vitality-based life in whole solar systems. Of course, the materials of such a tree would be used by A or maybe even S-grades.

The ash that was left over and found close to the trunk of the tree was rare by itself, and as far as Jake knew, any part of the actual tree would be ancient or maybe even legendary rarity. However, it made no sense to kill these trees, as the ash itself was valuable. Jake assumed the vampires had a few of these stashed away and fed them beasts or something like that to make them self-combust and leave behind ash. It was good stuff.

The next three were all also good stuff but considered relatively commonplace. Yet they did still stand out due to the high quality and rarity of the specimen Jake had been provided.

***[Spikestalk Root (Rare)] – The root of a Spikestalk. Spikestalks are plants that hide under the earth and strike any that get too close with blood-draining spikes. This blood energy is then deposited into the roots, where it is further refined into a liquid containing large amounts of life affinity. Has many alchemical uses.***

***[Bloodshade Flower (Rare)] – A flower growing in the soil of the freshly slain. This flower has absorbed large amounts of blood from vitality-based lifeforms and has evolved to what it is today. To better feed, it exude pollen that will make any vitality-based lifeform it comes into contact with bleed from any orifice. Has many alchemical uses and has a potent hemotoxin nature.***

***[Red Moss (Rare)] – Mutated moss that has become red due to being in an environment with potent blood affinity mana. The energy within has potent hemotoxin qualities but can also be used in restorative potions. Consuming the***

***Red Moss in small quantities will temporarily grant resistance to hemotoxins, while large amounts will lead to an overload causing hemorrhage.*** Latest content published on [novel.fire.net](http://novel.fire.net)

They all more or less did as their descriptions said but had no interesting qualities over that. The only reason these were even rare rarity was due to how old they were and the amount of energy each of them contained. Red Moss, as an example, was just mutated Green Moss and was relatively simple to make if one had a cave with arrays to constantly pump in blood mist or placed it among many Bloodshade Flowers. The stalk was just one of many carnivorous plants that liked to eat people. This one just did it by draining all their blood, a bit like the Indigo Fungus Jake had fought so long ago.

These were all the rare herbs Jake had gained. Next up was an item that wasn't a herb but was nevertheless extremely valuable.

***[Crystalized Blood Essence (Epic)] – The crystalized Blood Essence of a powerful C-grade vampire. Contains an incredibly potent blood affinity energy. Consuming the Crystalized Blood Essence as a vampire will restore Blood Energy, while if any other race consumes it, it will act as a hemotoxin. Has many alchemical uses.***

One thing that was common for all living creatures was that natural treasures would often be condensed when they died. For vampires, it was often their heart and their blood, and for someone like Jake, it would probably be his eyes that would be infused with his Records. The Crystalized Blood Essence was one such treasure as it had come from a dead C-grade vampire.

There were some discussions to be had about using the blood of a brethren to do alchemy, but the vampires had no qualms. In fact, they viewed it as respectful to make use of the corpse of someone who died. Across the multiverse, many who closed in on their deaths made wills concerning what they wanted to be done with their bodies. Thinking about it, it was a bit like organ donation before the system.

Anyway, this Crystalized Blood Essence was a great material and could be mixed into most hemotoxins to make them better. Each Crystalized Blood Essence could also be used dozens of times in crafts before it would run out of energy, making it suitable for alchemy.

The final item was the most interesting one and the one Jake knew the least about.

***[Crimson Dawn Lotus (Epic)] – The Lotus spawned after a Crimson Dawn. Contains incredibly potent blood affinity energy mixed with time affinity mana. Has many alchemical uses but is incredibly volatile.***

Blood and time. An incredibly potent combo, and Jake was a bit surprised this had even been included considering he hadn't asked for it. He had briefly come across the mention of Crimson Dawn Lotuses during one of the lessons, but it was only related to

how they only spawned during a Crimson Dawn. Jake had no idea what a Crimson Dawn was.

Luckily, he had a vampire right there with him.

“What is the Crimson Dawn?” Jake asked Fairleigh.

The old vampire smiled a bit as he pointed upwards to the huge red celestial object hanging above.

“What you see above is an ancient artifact crafted by the True Ancestor of the Nalkar Clan many Eras ago. It allows vampires to not feed as much and empowers us in every way while under its crimson light. However, as with most objects, it does not hold infinite energy. Every millennium there is a single month where the Blood Moon is down, and we have to perform a ritual to reawaken it. Once the ritual has been performed, it will rise again, bringing about a Crimson Dawn as its light washes over our lands. These lotuses only bloom during a Crimson Dawn, so they are quite valuable. The ones you have are from three hundred years ago but have been fully preserved,” Fairleigh explained, giving Jake some more interesting vampire lore.

Jake nodded in understanding. “Thank you for the trade.”

“No, thank you. I am not blind to us taking advantage of you by having a young talent use your necklace as an opportunity to complete her Evolution Quest even after you have given us so much. I hope the alchemical ingredients are at least acceptable, and please, do not hesitate to visit again. I have permanently unlocked your token to allow you access,” Fairleigh said with a smile. “Now, if there isn’t anything more, I sadly have other responsibilities to attend to.”

“Alright. I may stop by again at some point,” Jake nodded as the vampire disappeared in a puff of red mist.

Only a few seconds passed before the other vampire in the room asked in a rather odd tone. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Jake asked, confused.

“Speak to the Patriarch so casually. You show such little care and – no offense – lack decorum and grace. Is it truly to do with your Bloodline? Something about being a hunter?” Alcor asked. He seemed genuinely interested.

“Something like that. It allows me to ignore the suppression caused by their presence,” Jake answered, telling the truth while not wanting to explain further.

“Even so,” Alcor protested. “Do you not realize your way of acting could be viewed as disrespectful? That if you cause someone of such a higher status even the mildest level of annoyance, they could end your life with a touch... no, a single thought?”

“Sure I do,” Jake just shrugged.

“Then why act with such... arrogance?”

“Why not?” Jake just smiled. “What’s the worst they can do, kill me? Man, you really think too little of those more powerful. Just don’t be an outright dick, and things should be fine, and if they kill you due to being some butthurt cry-babies, well, it is what it is, and I will at least go out like a champ.”

Alcor just stared at Jake in disbelief as Jake just grinned without elaborating. What he said was once more the truth with some tiny modifications. Jake didn’t solely rely on being lucky to not meet a powerhouse that would kill others just for looking them in the eyes. He relied nearly solely on his intuition and sense of danger.

If he did meet someone who would go apeshit if Jake treated them as an equal, Jake would probably get a sense for it and just keep his damn mouth shut. Of course, if the person began acting like a pompous asshole, then Jake could potentially risk failing to hold himself back and get swatted into the river of reincarnation – or, more accurately, the Truesoul Recycling Center, if Jake’s understanding of life after death was correct.

Anyway, considering Alcor just sat back, Jake decided to inspect the Memory Crystal for some advice and tips on how to use his newly-obtained ingredients. Once he infused energy into it, he felt a wave of information enter his head, and Jake quickly became aware that Fairleigh had heavily downplayed it. The one who had infused knowledge into the crystal was an A-grade alchemist who specialized in hemotoxins and had not held back at all with including tips relevant for a D-grade.

Jake dove right in and began devouring the information. At some point, he felt a small poke on his soul, and knowing it was Rubylake needing his approval to improve the necklace, he just accepted and kept studying. Before going to the vampires, Jake had planned on taking a few more lessons on hemotoxins and some other minor subjects, but as he sat there going through it, he realized that wasn’t necessary. At least not for now.

The knowledge within focused on utilizing only the fifteen alchemical ingredients Jake had received. It was a hyper-specialized course on making basic hemotoxic potions with a whiff of an improved version Jake was very interested in attempting.

He even considered if he shou-



“Hunter, I believe the mistress is done,” the voice of Alcor suddenly said. However, even before Jake heard him, he was thrown out of his state of concentration. Something had changed.

He felt a connection to something just on the other side of a few walls and down in a cellar. At the same time, he felt like he had just leveled up many times as he experienced an influx of stats through that same connection. Rubylake had succeeded.

Without even thinking, Jake held out his hand, and on his palm, the necklace appeared, looking just like before. It was still made of platinum-like metal with the green gem faceted on a beautiful chain. The design was relatively simple, but Jake felt it practically humming with power. He had even somehow managed to summon it to himself through its innate space magic and his Soulbound connection.

Jake saw Rubylake rush out of the cellar through his sphere, and before she had even made it to the waiting room, Jake had inspected his new necklace.

***[Heart of the Alchemist (Legendary)] – Once merely proof you were a prodigy, now even more as you have shown you have the heart of an alchemist. An ornate creation of high craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a Space Heart Gem in place. Innate power still dwells within the Records of the necklace yet to be uncovered. Allows the user to store items in a medium-sized pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side effects in temporal suspension. Allows the user to directly deposit beneficial products into their own bodies with a slightly improved effect (can only be used once an hour). Enchantments: Alchemist's Spatial Storage. Innate Consumption. +500 Wisdom, +450 Willpower, +400 Intelligence.***

***Requirements: Soulbound***

Jake carefully studied every word of the improved description. There were a few changes, but the overall item was the same. The storage no longer said it was small but was now medium-sized, it had thrown in some more cryptic stuff about more Records within, and it had even added a new ability of sorts to directly consume things like potions through it for improved effects. Moreover, it gave an absolutely massive 1350 total stats from one item. It felt utterly insane, especially considering it also had all the other effects. He had thought the Altmar Signet was amazing for giving 1000 total, but that was also all it did.

Then again, this was an item he had gained at a far higher level. And as Rubylake stormed into the waiting room and saw Jake hold the necklace, she also shed some more light on the upgrade.

“I did not expect you to be able to summon it! Such a strong connection despite your still young age. I am impressed,” Rubylake nodded in approval, a huge smile on her face. “I



was actually afraid it would become too potent, but I felt no resistance or like it burdened your soul at any point. Hard to imagine anyone not already peak D-tier being able to use it.”

Jake just returned her smile. His level was still hidden, so she thought he was level 183, making it even better than she imagined. “I can see the craft succeeded. Did your quest too?”

Rubylake’s grin grew even more. “I am evolving just after this.”

Alcor, who had been silent after Jake had summoned the necklace, also seemed happy. “Congratulations, mistress! What are your expectations?”

“High, but time shall tell if they are met,” she said, returning her attention to Jake.

“Some things do still confuse me... the time it took was not as I expected,” she said, and Jake also checked how long had passed as he frowned.

Only a bit over five hours had passed while she had said it would take at least a day.

“How come?”

“I... everything just felt right? The materials resonated with the necklace nearly right away, the energy was effortlessly absorbed, and the Records and energy within the necklace seemed almost primed to be awakened. Have you had it attempted before?” Rubylake asked.

“No,” Jake shook his head. “You are the second person ever to lay a hand on it besides me.”

“Any idea who originally made it? Or if it was used by someone before it was transformed into what it is today?” she inquired further.

Jake just kept shaking his head. “I got it as a reward from the system.”

Rubylake frowned a bit but eventually just sighed in resignation. “Oh well, it doesn’t matter. Just... take care of it, okay? That necklace is no simple item.”

“Of course,” Jake said. “And thanks for your help.”

“I should be the one thanking you for giving me the opportunity. There is no way I would have succeeded this easily without you bringing such a wondrous item,” Rubylake bowed as she took out her token, and Jake felt his own within the necklace in his hand resonate. She had put her contact information into it.

“Simply call me if you ever need a jeweler,” she said.

“Sure thing,” Jake said as he returned the favor and also gave her his contact information. Mainly because if he wanted to contact her, it would be a bit awkward if she couldn’t answer. Wait, maybe she could answer? He wasn’t entirely sure how the call feature of the token actually worked now that he thought about it

“Anyway, good luck with the evolution,” Jake finally said as he felt like he had gotten all he had come for.

After a few more pleasantries, Jake put on his necklace and fused it with his body once more. He then promptly headed back to the mansion, and after a brief exchange with Meira, he dove into the laboratory.

He had no plans of exiting anytime soon. Because if there was any question if Jake had been scammed, the answer was a resounding no. Because the true value of the ingredients didn’t lie in their rarity alone but in the sheer quantity of what he had received.

That’s right, Jake was about to waste an absolute shitload of expensive materials.

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## **Chapter 447: Momentum + Wealth = Progress**

Meira went over some material from her latest lesson as she gazed towards the mansion. Sir had said he would be around less, but she had believed he insinuated he would leave the Order to return to his own universe, not this.

He had entered the laboratory and then just stayed there after giving Meira the task of handling anyone who came looking for him. He had even done so everyone who tried to contact him through the token would instead reach her, making Meira more than a little uncomfortable.

She had to tell off a newly advanced C-grade vampire, the succubus in charge of his group from the ninety-third universe, and dozens more who wanted to speak with him and had somehow gotten his contact information. Meira the fact that he had a Bloodline that had leaked, and it seemed they all wanted to discuss it with her Master, but the only one they would reach was her.

Meira had to steel herself every time the token activated, and she had to answer only to inform them that her Master was in seclusion doing alchemy. The only lucky thing was

that everyone accepted this answer, and coupled with no sightings of him anywhere, they had no reason to doubt her.

She herself was still busy going to lessons every day and learning. Meira was honestly still unsure of the reason why she had been tasked to do it, but she naturally would try her best. She did realize that with every day, her value increased, and she began to have the pet theory that he was actually nurturing her into a long-term slave. That he wouldn't discard her but keep her around.

This was also confusing in its own right, though. It was normal to get new slaves once you advanced a grade to have more useful subordinates. Of course, you couldn't have slaves beyond your own grade, so real talents like the Chosen naturally had to switch out often as there was no way for a slave to keep up in levels, much less be able to have the same level of Records to keep advancing.

Maybe he was planning on having her serve his descendants? It could also just be that he was eccentric and wanted to see how far she could go. If that was the case, Meira would certainly do her best, and hopefully, that would be good enough.

However, for every day that passed, she actually began doubting if he had just stopped bothering with her. She had originally hoped for this scenario before meeting her new Master, but now it gave her conflicting emotions. It wasn't that she truly believed he had forgotten, but that small tinge of doubt never left, no matter how logical she tried to be. It was true that he was in seclusion, after all. The problem was that his way of doing it was a bit abnormal.

It would be fine if it was only in there for reasonable periods when he entered seclusion. When it came to alchemy, a highly intense type of crafting that required a high level of focus, it was normal to at most be in seclusion a week or so at a time while in D-grade, take a few days to rest, and then go back into the laboratory. This was to renew focus and get rest, as many couldn't properly relax within the laboratory.

This was the normal way... and him doing alchemy in seclusion was normal... the problem was that he hadn't taken a single step out of the laboratory for over two months.

The entire area was tinged red as the scent of blood dominated the air. Most vitality-based creatures in early D-grade would find themselves bleeding from every orifice if they entered this dense cloud of crimson mist, truly turning it into a domain of death.

Luckily it was contained within a shielded room. A room where only a single alchemist sat in the center, unbothered by the mist. No, the opposite of bothered. He reveled in this environment as it fueled his regeneration.

This was naturally Jake, who was sitting within his alchemy lab. He had been busy crafting hemotoxin after hemotoxin, going through the net worth of some D-grades every single day as he spent the valuable materials he had received from the vampires.

To Jake, gaining levels was very easy when compared to others due to his overwhelming amount of already accumulated Records. He could spend a few weeks within a forest and probably get a dozen class levels just killing more powerful foes and taking advantage of all his class bonuses.

This was relatively normal as most everyone could quickly gain class or even race levels by slaying those of significantly higher levels. Jake did not doubt this was how the King had gained so many levels so quickly. Of course, one should do this with moderation to not hurt one's Records, and it also came with the inherent risk of death, but sometimes a burst of potential was truly what one needed.

Crafting like Jake did, splurging on materials with no care for cost in the face of progress, was in many ways similar to hunting far more powerful enemies in quick succession for levels. Rather than necessarily needing to be perfect when he made a poison, the value of the ingredients alone could help uplift the rarity.

Within the first week of Jake's isolation, he had already gone through hundreds of rare materials and even more common and uncommon ones. Yet he kept pushing on without the slightest care as he felt the progress like never before.

Concepts that would have taken him far longer to grasp before he understood instantly. When he encountered a minor problem, he would often have a eureka moment, remembering something mentioned in lessons, skimmed in a book, or recalled due to Sagacity and Palate. He was truly harvesting the fruits of his labor.

He had not truly crafted anything since coming to the Order. He had barely gotten any levels but had just fortified his fundamental abilities, and now it was time to build that damn tower higher. Jake had chosen hemotoxins as his method of doing this because he wanted something that would be effective when hunting beasts. Necrotic Poison also helped, but Jake knew Hemotoxic Poison was better in prolonged combat. Besides, he already had uncommon rarity Necrotic Poison, which was pretty good.

Jake also used his blood in every creation, which was more potent than ever before, not to mention all the stats that just helped with everything. Things had just gone so smoothly, and after the first week, his experience and talent in crafting hemotoxins rivalled his best kind of poison prior, Necrotic Poison, as he crafted an uncommon rarity version.

***\*You have successfully crafted [Potent Hemotoxic Poison (Uncommon)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned\****

***[Potent Hemotoxic Poison (Uncommon)] - Greatly increases bleeding on infected entities and makes any injuries significantly harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect. Spreads throughout the body of the inflicted foe near-instantly, making it even harder to dispel.***

To most alchemists, using several rare ingredients and even using the epic Crystalized Blood Essence to further improve the process and then only end up with an uncommon rarity product would be viewed as an utter failure. But what had Jake done? He made another batch. And then another.

He just kept pumping out concoction after concoctions with no regard for wastage as he rapidly improved. When he got tired, he slumped over and slept. When he was in doubt, he entered Serene Soul Meditation to calm his mind and refocus on his task. No outside interference got in his way, and even Villy seemed to understand as Jake had not heard the god ever since he had entered the laboratory.

Weeks passed by fast, and he had barely noticed when it had been more than a month since he entered seclusion. Yet he didn't feel tired at all as he kept pushing, still finding new inspiration and improvements every day, no, every hour. He even recalled the times he had fought the vampires in Yalsten and some of their blood magic. Especially the magic of the Monarch of Blood, and he remembered when he had bitten and consumed the blood of the ancient revived vampire. Blood that had now mixed into him with Palate, as it qualified as toxic simply due to the level of sheer life energy it had contained.

Every day was just great, and he produced piles of Potent Hemotoxic Poison. One good thing about the Order was the limitless supply of glass bottles. He had thrown a buttload into his new and improved spatial storage already, with it barely taking up any space.

On the sixty-third day after Jake entered seclusion, he had been crafting his most difficult creation yet. It contained the Crimson Dawn Lotus and pulled on all of Jake's insights he had gained so far and his understanding of the concept of time. This was far from the first try, but he had a good feeling as Jake became more and more familiar with the concept due to his class skills and further improved his level of comprehension as he researched the lotuses.

By researching, he meant he ate them for Palate, something he had done with all of his obtained herbs.

If others saw this, they would be spitting up blood, but Jake didn't care. He knew he was wealthy, and he knew he could earn back his wealth again. Hoarding materials without progressing made no sense. And progress Jake did, as he on that day finally managed to succeed – just before he hit the two-month mark since entering the laboratory.

***\*You have successfully crafted [Accelerated Hemotoxic Poison (Rare)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned\****

***[Accelerated Hemotoxic Poison (Rare)] – Time heals all wounds, or so the saying goes, but to some alchemists, time can become yet another weapon. Greatly increases bleeding on infected entities and makes any injuries significantly harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect. Spreads throughout the body of the inflicted foe near-instantly, making it even harder to dispel. Forcefully speeds up the flow of blood within the foe, forcefully accelerating the effect of the poison, making it deal damage faster over a far shorter period.***

Seeing the notification had put a massive smile on his face. The poison was exactly what he had hoped and avoided one of the biggest weaknesses of the Hemotoxic Poison, which was the slow-acting effect. By mixing in some time affinity from the Crimson Dawn Lotus, the process would be sped up and make the poison even better. The ash from the Crimsonwood tree would then make the poison bind with the blood more thoroughly, making it even harder to get rid of too. It was one nasty poison, and one Jake was very happy about making. Especially as it was followed by another system message.

***[Concoct Poison (Uncommon)] - While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of uncommon-rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on Wisdom.***

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***[Concoct Poison (Rare)] - While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of rare rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on Wisdom.***

When he had gained the upgrade, Jake was more than elated. He had wanted Concoct Poison to reach rare before he evolved to C-grade. He had evolved it to uncommon rarity in E-grade and now rare in D-grade, so he had to keep the streak going, right? He knew this was already far better than the average, making him smile as he read the changed description.

As expected, it was much of the same, just pointing out he could now make rare rarity poison. The only other benefit was that it increased Wisdom scaling, now making every poison he created slightly better. More than anything, upgrading a skill like this was a feel-good moment and not a purely practical one... okay, it apparently did have a great impact on Records and potential profession evolutions, but Jake had a feeling he would be fine in that department either way.



Speaking of Records, there finally was the big one. The one other goal Jake had when he entered seclusion: to get some god damn levels. And levels he got.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 153 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\****

...

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 168 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 153 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\****

... UPDATE FROM *novel•fire•net*

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 160 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\****

Sixteen levels in his profession in only a bit over two months. It was roughly one level every four days, which quite frankly was insane and proof of how many materials he had burned through as well as the level of progress he had made. He knew this had been him building off the momentum he had amassed for the last few months before the crafting sessions, but during it all, he also realized how much he had to pull on for knowledge even before he went to the Order.

One had to remember Jake had undergone the Trial of Myriad Poisons. He had been injected with – as the name suggested – myriad poisons, and even if this didn't help much in his daily life, it allowed him to more easily understand things when he came across them. He got a sense of deja-vu whenever a poison he had consumed prior popped up. As with most knowledge, he didn't just remember everything, but the knowledge only appeared when in the right context.

With the levels also came two other benefits. One was Path of the Heretic-Chosen getting another charge, and the second was skill selection. To cut a short story even shorter, Jake picked the best skill of the bunch.

***[Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)] – To touch upon a core of pure energy and Records is to touch upon the broken shell of a soul. Allows the alchemist to far more easily manipulate cores and the Records within the broken soul shells with the goal of refining them. Refined cores will, in most cases, be more effective, and you can also choose to amplify certain effects. Having taken it further, you have learned that the layers of souls can be malleable in some circumstances, and applying this knowledge, you have learned to fuse cores containing similar Records and even change their nature in some circumstances***



***as your own soul influences the core. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Advanced Core Manipulation based on Wisdom and Willpower.***

The reason why he had chosen this skill was two-fold. First of all, it was something he felt like he needed, especially as he had decided that it would soon be time to awaken the Pollendust Bee Queen. Okay, Jake-soon, as he still didn't feel even close to ready. Additionally, he also knew that core refinement did not work very well with Touch of the Malefic Viper, as that was more core corruption. After all, touch did not really "improve" something; it just changed it. He needed a dedicated skill, so when he saw the option, he was instantly intrigued.

This was clearly an upgrade to the rare Refine Core skill he had been offered at level 120. Back then, he had skipped it due to its low rarity but also because he didn't have any immediate use. Both of those things had now changed.

As for the skill itself, well, as far as he could tell, it pulled a lot on his experience with Shroud of the Primordial. It had something to do with soul shells or something, and to be fair, Jake was not entirely sure what it was talking about. Either way, he had a strong feeling the skill would be very useful, and it would also offer him more diversity when it came to alchemy. Oh, and being able to fuse the thousands of insect cores he had would make the ritual to awaken the Pollendust Bee Queen way simpler and likely also more effective. The skill also came with a lot of innate knowledge, giving him confidence in using it.

Anyway, that was the first reason he had picked it: because it was good. The second reason was that everything else offered was shit. Like, so shit, he didn't even want to think about it. Every single one of the four other options related to Jake being either a Chosen or a Heretic. All of it was about Jake being back at the Order of the Malefic Viper and offered him a leadership skill, a skill granting knowledge of the Order, a skill to grow dissent and make more heretics, and some fourth bullshit skill Jake would never pick in a thousand years. Rather pick the god damn geology skill at inferior rarity than that.

And this more or less was Jake's progress over the last two months and a bit. He had kept crafting a few more rare poisons until the evening of the same day he had made the first one. That is when he was finally contacted by the one person he had allowed to.

*"Carmen contacted me a while ago and asked me to inform you she was on her way to Haven and would arrive within a day or two. She found clues on where her family might be and a trail to start following. More details to follow when you get back."*

The moment Jake heard the message, he also felt like now was a good time to stop. He hadn't entirely burned through all his momentum, but it was best to stop now anyway. He had reached his goal, and he was tired anyway.

So Jake sent back an affirmation as he prepared to leave seclusion for the first time in over two months. On a side note, Miranda had known he was in seclusion, and, for that reason, they had skipped their agreed-upon meetings. They did have a small talk before he entered seclusion and agreed on her giving him a debrief once he returned to Earth.

At the same time as he exited the laboratory, he also reached out to the Viper and got confirmation: the snake god had made a better method for Jake to return to Earth.

That settled everything as finally, it was time to return to Earth. He would not return to the Order until after the next system event either, but he would have to hunt down a Prima before that. Something he had also made prior preparations for with the help of Miranda and a little-known mad scientist called Arnold. He also had to help Carmen, so he had plenty of things to do. Things he wanted to do.

Jake smiled to himself as he smelled the fresh air outside the laboratory, happy with everything he had achieved and even happier as he thought about visiting Earth again and finally getting in some good stretches by killing something.

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## Chapter 448: Unexpected New Paths

Before returning to Earth, Jake needed a proper method to travel back and forth that didn't rely on being in Haven. Luckily, he had already talked about this with Villy quite a few times and knew the snake god was on it. They both wanted to give Jake the possibility as there were still many things to be done back on his home planet and in his home universe as a whole.

So a quick telepathic phone call later, the snake god popped into his living room – Meira being away at a lesson. Jake not even having talked with her yet since exiting his little isolation session.

“Had a nice time doing alchemy?” Villy asked when he appeared, smiling.

“Pretty good if I say so myself, lots of levels, skill upgrade, a new skill, hemotoxins for days. You know, all the good things in life,” Jake joked in response.

“Nice to know my dear Chosen at least enjoys what I am known for. Well, known for in an at least a semi-positive light,” Villy answered with his own cheeky smile before continuing. “I remember you mentioning you took a skill for rituals, right?”

"I did," Jake confirmed as he had a suspicion about why the Viper asked.

"Well, that entire travel-between-universes issue will require a bit of ritual-making from your side to function," the Viper explained as he fished out a crystal he promptly tossed to Jake. It was similar to the one the vampires had given him and contained knowledge.

Jake quickly scanned it and saw it was a guide for some kind of ritual or array. It didn't take a genius to figure out what the Viper was asking of him. "I need to set up my own teleportation circles?"

He did not like the sound of that. Jake had no experience with magic circles at all, and even if he now had a skill that helped a bit, he had no confidence in setting anything complex up without a long period of practice first.

"Yes and no. You do technically need to make a magic circle, but not a teleportation circle per-se. What you will need to do is make a subordinate circle to the primary teleporter placed in the city. Think about it as a receiver with the monument in your city as the sender. You just need to tap into the signal and remote-activate the monument, and off you go through the void between universes," Villy explained.

Jake nodded a bit as he kept scanning the Memory Crystal. It really didn't seem that complicated, but Jake could still see setting up the circle would take a bit of time, not making the teleportation anything instant.

"Thanks, man, this should come in handy," Jake said as the snake god also threw him a bunch of stones, as well as an odd green orb.

"Use those stones to activate the circle and feed it power together with your own mana. As for the orb, give it to that little verdant witch of yours. It is a gift from her Patrons," Villy said.

Jake inspected the two items he had been given right away and frowned a bit.

***[Energy Stone (Common)] – A stone containing energy.***

***[Verdant Orb (Unique)] – An orb made to be used only by those compatible.***

It was one of those cases where Identify did nothing. He was a bit surprised at getting common rarity stones from Villy to power the circle, but then again, what the hell did he know?

"Anything else I should bring back?" Jake asked.

"Now that you mention it, I do have this nascent plague I would like to ask for you to spread and then report back on the general deadliness," Villy grinned.

"I could take it and just eat it with Palate," Jake commented.

"Funny that you mention it... that is actually quite a normal tactic. A specific poison or disease designed to kill anyone and anything, while being especially weak against Palate, making all those with the skill survive," Villy said nonchalantly.

"Is that actually something people do?" Jake asked, not sure if he wanted the answer.

"Plague theory is not really a big branch of the Order. If I am perfectly honest, it is due to its generally low level of power. It is only good at killing those significantly weaker, and even then, it is often easily thwarted by talented healers and others finding ways to combat it. But yes, it has been used. More by the Risen than the Order, though, as it is a good way to clear life-affinity energy from an area to kill off all the weak critters, turning it into a land of death," the god explained. "Now, if you really wanna kill a planet without having to kill everything by yourself... ah, never mind, we'll save that one for another time. Just know you already possess the necessary tools, even if you lack the power to pull it off."

"I will not mind, no, as I have no plans of destroying any planets," Jake shook his head.

"Yet," Villy foreshadowed with a cheeky smile.

"Anyway!" Jake cut the conversation all. "How the hell do I get back to Earth?"

"Oh. Yeah. That. Well, I already installed the teleporter in your secret sealed-off basement room."

"I have a secret sealed-off basement room?"

"As of ten minutes ago, Yes," the god said as he motioned for Jake to follow him.

They went over to the library, where the god went over and pulled on a book that made a bookshelf swing open, revealing a stairway. One that had definitely not been there before.

"A little basic," Jake commented.

"What can I say? I am a fan of the classics," Villy answered with a shrug.

"You just infused mana into the entire shelf, didn't you?" Jake asked, having felt the flow of energy.

"Oh yeah, totally. The book is just for show. The activation mechanism is bound to your mana, well, and mine, but mainly yours. An array covers the entire place, making even most gods unable to locate this area," the snake god further explained as they both walked down into a small chamber with an intricate teleportation circle in the middle.

Jake looked at it for a moment and the scripts that covered the wall. “I take it you facilitate the teleportation from this universe and back to the ninety-third entirely?”

“Precisely. You just need to step on the platform, put a bit of mana in, and off you go. It even works with others, but only up to a dozen or so at a time. More than that, and, well, some might get stuck in the void mid-teleport.”

“AKA a bad time,” Jake nodded.

“Well, not really an anything-time, as it would just mean ceasing to exist, but that is another conversation my poor little D-grade Chosen is too young to have. By the time you are ready to enter the void yourself, you won’t even be my Chosen anymore,” Villy said with a smile. “Now, better get going.”

“Aight. Thanks for this time, and see you soon,” Jake said as he got on the teleporter. He infused mana into it as he, at that very last moment, remembered: he had forgotten about Meira.

Sadly, he was already swept away before he could stop it as he disappeared from the first universe and went back towards Earth.

Back on Earth, the planet had experienced what many would classify as a second renaissance after the system had arrived. The system event that allowed individuals to revitalize themselves and find a new path had passed, with it bringing about incredible change.

For many, the event didn’t affect them personally. Individuals like Miranda, Jacob, Carmen, Neil, and his party, or any elite really, weren’t affected in the slightest. This event was not for them. No, the true change was found in the level 30 construction worker who had not received a level in months. The warrior who discovered he wasn’t suited for fighting beasts in close range, the mage who learned he was not talented in magic, or just those who had never truly found a Path.

To these people, the event was a second chance. Classes and professions were changed, people found new hope, and a sense of life enveloped every city as progress returned to many. Simply finding a new path and doing the event had also resulted in Records, allowing those who had changed to get an initial period where they almost sprinted, fast getting stronger and more assured in their choices.

For some who were stuck, this event led to no changes, not because they had failed, but because they were already set on their Path – even if that Path was a mediocre one. The small restaurant owner who was satisfied with his life, the smith that enjoyed just working a few hours a day and then relaxing the rest with his family. These people had chosen a Path, even if it wasn’t one to power.

Nevertheless, this led to growth across the planet. The average level of humanity grew, and more and more D-grades appeared as the native humans got a second wind. To make it even better, these people who had just gained another chance could potentially also participate in the next event less than a month away. If not the Path of Myriad Choices, then at least participate in whatever Seat of the Exalted Prima was.

The cities that benefitted the most were naturally the large ones. Sanctdomo had a massive spike in power, but the fringe groups like the Court of Shadows and Risen also got a boost few had expected: re-alignment of their citizens. Many had picked professions and classes during their tutorials with no knowledge they would end up working with shadow assassins or the living dead, but now that they got a chance to change? They adapted.

Among the Risen, Necromancers, death mages, crafters specialized in death-attuned materials, and even people who decided during the event they wanted to become Risen. For the Court, the same was true as many became more specialized in what the Court needed, with a similar thing playing out all around the planet.

Haven didn't actually experience that much growth overall. Most who went there were already settled in their own Paths, so while some did make use of the event, the vast majority of them didn't. However, there was one large exception.

Miranda sat in the office and drank some coffee with the man in front of her. The last time they had spoken had only been a week ago, but he had grown significantly yet again. Back then, he had just reached D-grade, and now he was already level 110. However, more surprising than anything was that the man had been stalled for so long beforehand.

"You are looking better than ever, Phillip," Miranda smiled at the former military man and leader of the Fort.

"It sure is a strange time," the man said as he also took a sip. His face no longer looked sunken, and he was no longer a tired man at the end of his rope. Miranda had come to understand him quite well with time and come to realize that while he was strong for his level when they first met, it wasn't because he really wanted to be strong. The latest\_episodes are on the *novel*·fire·net

He had been part of the military. He had been the leader and sent into a tutorial with people from his camp, and they had all turned to him for guidance. When he got out of the Tutorial, he had appeared in the old base camp, and yet again, all had turned to him for guidance as he was the highest-rank commanding officer present.

Out of a sense of responsibility, he had accepted. Then they found a sanctuary, saved citizens, made the Fort a fortified settlement, and he just kept going because he had to. But then Jake had turned up. A magical bird had rebuffed a force he and his men would



get slaughtered by. Miranda came and helped take over the management of the Fort. Suddenly he no longer had any responsibilities and was lost.

Phillip had, by all accounts, retired. He was already a middle-aged man before the system arrived and was tired of the constant pressure and expectations. His sense of responsibility was so ingrained in him that he kept working even after he “retired” as a representative of the former soldiers and those who stayed at the Fort. Not that they needed a representative, he was just the kind of man that couldn’t sit still.

And then... then this system event came. Miranda had expected a lot of people to find their Path through this event, but Phillip was not one of them. He didn’t seem to have the drive anymore, but it appeared she had miscalculated.

The man before her could barely be compared to the old Phillip. No longer was he a man constantly wandering around with his rifle to look “official” or with a profession to lead the troops and defend the Fort. Instead, he sat there with well-defined muscles, skin that had an odd semi-metallic tinge to it, while only wearing a thin shirt and normal pants. He wore no equipment at all, yet Miranda felt his body brimming with power.

Alteration Mage. No, to call him a mage was perhaps incorrect. He was more a fighter than a mage, even if he did use magic as his primary tool of combat. The difference was that the only target of his magic was himself and his own body. His profession had also changed to be some kind of enchanter. Miranda was not privy to the details, but she knew he was no easy opponent, especially not after reaching D-grade.

“Are you sure you want to fully step down from *all* of your positions?” Miranda asked to confirm. Phillip had still been a part of many endeavors but had slowly phased them out. Now he came to get entirely uninvolved with everything Haven and Fort-related.

“I am,” Phillip nodded. “I have done enough for this place. For others. From now on, I will focus on myself and myself only. I plan on leaving soon to travel around a bit after the event, but before that, I want to get enough levels to properly do the dungeon beneath the city.”

She also liked how he looked when he talked about exploring the planet. He looked happy, perhaps for the first time since she met the man over a year ago.

“It is your choice,” Miranda said approvingly.

“For the first time in a long time... it truly does feel like it is,” he smiled in response.

Back with Jake, he was still making his way to Earth.

Jake felt himself flow through the void once more. He closed his eyes and tried to seal off his Sphere of Perception to not be overwhelmed by the odd sensation the place gave him as he hoped for it to pass quickly.



However... it didn't.

It took longer than before. Jake suddenly felt like a gaze landed upon him, and he sensed himself stop. At the same time, he felt an overwhelming sense of danger for a fraction of a second before it disappeared just as it came. At the same time, Jake's sphere no longer felt overloaded... in fact, it felt like whatever space he was in had suddenly turned stable and un-void-like.

Jake opened his eyes and saw the pitch-black darkness of the void as cold sweat appeared, and an innate fear swelled up from deep in his soul. He saw only the darkness that high enough Perception could perhaps one day pierce, as he had no idea what or who was watching. He was unsure what was happening as he felt something besides Villy just staring, with Villy's attention on him being far weaker.

He felt a bit nervous as suddenly a single eye appeared within his vision. A human eye with an odd multi-colored iris. Then another. Then ten eyes, a hundred, thousand, million. The entire void was replaced by a rainbow of colored eyes before they all merged together and formed what could be described as a malformed head that appeared small yet filled his entire field of vision.

*"Deliver. Gift."*

A voice echoed in his head made up of a mix of distorted voices as blood began pouring out of his ears and eyes. Jake had to grit his teeth as he slowly felt his consciousness slip away as if his mind was shutting down to protect his psyche. Something impacted his chest as he began blacking out while floating through the void again.

The final thing he saw before slipping out of consciousness was the entire void suddenly gaining a dark green tinge as a familiar presence descended.

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## Chapter 449: Oras

Vilastromoz made sure Jake had safely passed through the void and back to his planet before he regarded the being before him. Today had been a stark reminder that even with all of his preparations, there existed beings in the multiverse that could circumvent them.

The Viper had used several methods to hide Jake traveling through the void. The biggest one was, of course, Shroud of the Primordial, but the teleportation itself should

also help hide him. These preparations should have been unnecessary anyway, as locating anything traveling through the void in such a brief period was beyond even the Viper himself. Finally, why would some ancient and powerful being even bother with interfering with someone teleporting through? Trillions went through the void every moment, so what was one in so many?

Yet none of that mattered before the being in front of him. It was the same being that had originally spotted Jake when he traveled to the Order. The fact he had been spotted the first time around was no surprise, as the being saw most everything that ever passed the void, with the only surprise being Jake noticing the gaze. Well, not a surprise to Vilastromoz, but probably the creature.

*“Snake Who Holds Forgotten Knowledge, you seek compensation?”* the voice of the being echoed as the ever-shifting reptilian eyes moved before him.

“I first seek answers,” Vilastromoz said, not minding the title the being had assigned him.

*“Traveler of the void, passing the veil of the new world. A gift given to be delivered to that which I gaze upon,”* the Void Dweller answered as cryptically as ever.

The Viper frowned at the answer. For the Void Dweller before him to gaze upon someone was just a fancy way of saying it had blessed them. Normally that would be whatever, but the situation was different when dealing with beings like this. A god’s Blessing would affect the target, yes, but the Blessing of a Void Dweller, much less one like the one before him? The effects would be significant. Merely seeing a Void Dweller could make mortals lose their minds and have their mental faculties irreversibly corrupted, so it was no surprise a Blessing did even more.

“What did you ask to be delivered?” the Viper asked.

*“Gift. Knowledge. Power.”*

“And who is it supposed to be delivered to?” Vilastromoz kept pressing.

*“He Who Commands The Many Eyes That Dwell Within the Soulless Vessels of Metal and Lightning. Seeker of knowledge like I,”* the Void Dweller explained without much care for the overly long title.

Vilastromoz finally turned his gaze towards Earth and quickly did a scan. He had never bothered to scan the ones around Jake much, just a cursory one. He had assumed none could hide from his probing, but upon a deeper inspection, he noticed there was indeed one person with a Blessing he hadn’t noticed before, making him frown even more.

“You could have asked before making my Chosen a mule,” the Viper protested as he stared into the many eyes.

*“Yes... decision made in haste. Apologies, Keeper of Lost Knowledge. Compensation will be made,”* the Void Dweller answered, as the eyes shifted a bit in apology. Vilastromoz could read this particular Void Dweller as it wasn’t one of the mindless beasts that usually roamed the endless void, but one most gods of any repute had found themselves in contact with several times in the past.

“What do you offer me?” he asked.

*“To the Primordial? None shall be given. Compensation for He Who Hunts. An equal, is he not? Nascent seeds will be planted, more futures planned. Outcomes predicted falsely before, corrections required,”* the Void Dweller answered.

Vilastromoz just sighed as the eyes kept shifting. He felt movement from afar as he stood in the middle of the void as the attention of more beings began gathering as the Viper had let his aura flare. “Fine. Just don’t have this repeat itself. Even if you want a favor from him, ask through me. Finally, why are you playing with the minds of mortals? I never figured you to be the kind of being to break a weak mortal like that.”

*“Interpretations infinite, minds of unlimited variations. Comprehension of He With Eyes of Steel, mortal yet mind untouched. Corruption minimal, patterns recognized; seeks only knowledge. Compatible.”*

He understood the answer as most of the communication did not come in words but in shapes and expressions made by its body. The Viper didn’t ask further but just looked at the Void Dweller and the ever-flowing ocean of eyes it consisted of. It was a physique not like any other creatures in the multiverse, and these Void Dwellers could only reside within the void. Well, most of them anyway.

“I shall trust your discretion then,” the Viper nodded. “May your gaze land upon all of existence, Oras the All-Seeing.”

*“May your will shape reality, Malefic Viper of the Primordials.”*

With that, the eyes all disappeared as Vilastromoz sighed again. Oras was a difficult one to deal with. A creature as ancient as could be, a true god of the void, unlike the majority of its void brethren.

Speaking of Void Dwellers. The Viper chose not to leave right away as he felt the many creatures close in on him, their auras dominating the vast nothingness, every single one of them able to slay gods like were they children before men. The weakest Void Dwellers in the void were a match for a newly ascended god, with the ones closing in on the Viper being far above that level, able to slay Godkings and Godqueens easily.

Predators of a domain that should not be threaded by those belonging to the universes. The mere aura of a god attracted them as they sought to feast and grow from the slaughter of energies not of the void.

Vilastromoz had to admit he felt angry. So far, he had predicted most things, and those he had failed to predict, he had at least had a sense would happen, or they had led to positive outcomes above expectations. However, someone like Oras was not predictable. Vilastromoz did not understand the Void God like he understood his fellow Primordials. Something that annoyed him severely.

Hopefully, the deaths of the approaching Void Dwellers would quell that anger just a little bit, also giving him a chance to get a good stretch in.

Jake woke up with a start as he quickly oriented himself. The entire area around him was filled with his own mana as he found himself in a defensive position. Instinctually he knew that he and everyone else had gotten lucky that nobody had entered his laboratory, where Jake had returned to upon arriving on Earth.

As he observed his sphere, he noticed something out of place. On the floor in front of him lay a small black cube with magical patterns on it and what looked like eyes marking its surface. He instantly recognized the faint energy it gave off as the same as the creature he had encountered in the void.

Just thinking about that thing made his head hurt as he groaned in pain. He tried to find out how long he had been out of commission instead and found out he had been knocked out for well over an hour. He checked his status and saw he had lost health, mana, and stamina from the encounter, indicating soul damage. Soul damage from just looking at the damn thing.

The box on the floor suddenly caught his eye. Where had that come from? It had the same energy as the being he saw in the void and-

A headache assaulted him again. Without thinking, Jake pulled off his cloak and threw it over the cube on the floor, making his headache instantly subside. At the same time, he remembered everything far more clearly. That damn box was able to make him forget it even existed? What the actual fuck was it?

"Villy... what the fuck is going on?" Jake finally asked. A few seconds passed as he got an answer.

*"You met a Void God... again. Oras, as it is known. An ancient creature born of the void."* Villy answered, sounding annoyed.

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"How did he spot me with Shroud? Also, are you okay? I remember seeing you appear just as I blacked out..."

*"I am fine. And Oras spotted you because the Shroud and everything else I do isn't good enough to hide you when in the void. Not from Oras," the Viper explained.*

"What the hell does that thing want? Something about a gift? Who for?" Jake asked, even more confused.

*"Traveling through the void isn't easy. Going out of the ninety-third universe is especially hard, and going back in? I reckon only a few can even facilitate this return trip. Oras spotted you and decided to have you bring something into the ninety-third universe. The gift you received is not for you, but the one Oras has 'blessed.' I use that word very carefully as the usual result from someone getting blessed by a Void God is a cult that makes the Order of the Malefic Viper look like the good guys in comparison. Luckily, Oras cares little for anything besides knowledge and seeing new things... at least as far as I can tell. I don't fully understand the creature."*

Jake nodded in understanding. "So, who is this god-forsaken box a gift for?"

*"Arnold."*

Hearing the name, Jake's eyes flashed for a moment. For some reason, the answer didn't surprise him, even if he did find it confusing why some being from the void would bless Arnold, a guy who liked making machines. Confusion the Viper clearly detected.

*"I don't know why Oras blessed that man. That is for you to discover, but in my experience, the logic of a Void Dweller is not worth trying to comprehend. However, it does seem like Arnold is mostly unaffected... I would look into why that is. His mind seems to accept the Void Dweller, which is quite peculiar," the Viper said.*

"So, should I deliver the box?" Jake finally asked.

*"Go ahead. Oras said you would get some kind of compensation, and while I do not understand the creature, it somewhat understands mortals. So his compensation should be worth it."*

Jake nodded again, and after a few more words, they ended their conversation. He felt that the Viper seemed somewhat distracted during their talk, but that wasn't anything new. What was new was the Viper actively using the name of another mortal. This indicated that Villy actually viewed Arnold as someone with some level of importance now, showing that this Oras was a big deal.

Wanting his cloak back, Jake closed his eyes and pulled it off the box. Luckily he could look at the box using his Sphere of Perception without feeling like his head was about to split open. He took out a black piece of cloth from his inventory and wrapped the box in

it before putting it inside a wooden barrel he normally used for water. The entire thing was only about the size of a shoebox, and when he tried to lift it, he noticed how it didn't weigh anything. That wasn't an exaggeration either; the metal-looking box with eyes on it literally didn't weigh anything. It was honestly just creepy.

At least he could put it in his spatial storage while still in the barrel. Jake proceeded to walk up to the lodge above and over to the pond, where he quickly washed the blood off his face from bleeding out of his own orifices. He wasn't in a hurry to deliver the box and decided to get a few things done first.

Firstly he checked in on the troll down in the cavern. Rick, as he had been named, was still just chilling with what was now a sprawling garden down in the biodome. His kids were also there, having grown a little since the last time he saw them.

Next up, he headed for the city center of Haven and met up with Miranda. They had a good talk with Jake getting updated on recent happenings in the city. He even remembered to give her that Verdant Orb Villy had handed him - primarily because she reminded him to.

He wasn't entirely sure how to feel when he got told that his absence hadn't really had any impact and that most assumed he was just in the valley doing alchemy or out hunting or something.

The city itself had grown even more since the last time he was there. He was informed that the Fort had expanded yet again as more and more sought the larger settlements. He learned about the outcome of the first system event and how many had begun progressing again, including Phillip. Jake honestly didn't care overly much, even if he was happy that others were finding their own roads to power.

Their meeting was interrupted about an hour in as suddenly Jake felt a gust of wind enter through an open window, and the next moment, a bird was standing atop his head. Jake had felt her coming but didn't react, allowing the hawk to get her small moment of triumph as she screeched and flapped her wings happily.

Jake raised his hands and lifted her off his head as he gave the bird a hug. "Hey Sylphie, long time no see."

The hawk looked up as she snuggled up to him, Jake just stroking her small head. He smiled, yet he had a somewhat mixed feeling when he used Identify and saw her level.

### **[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 163]**

For the first time since her birth, she had surpassed him in levels. Jake would lie if he said it wasn't somewhat expected. Sylphie was still growing rapidly and was still just identified as an Eyas, meaning that even if she just slept and did nothing, she would



keep leveling. Combined with her Blessing from Stormild, her connection to Jake, and her own efforts, it was no a surprise she had kept progressing so fast.

As he held her, she made some cute chirping sounds as Jake nodded along, getting the gist of what she was saying. She even summoned a medal of sorts with the same symbol on it as Jake's Altmar Signet, meaning his little hawk had also gotten the highest evaluation too – or at least been evaluated to be impossible to evaluate.

One thing also quickly became clear. Sylphie was not back in Haven just to say hi to Jake but because Carmen was coming. Jake was totally fine with the two-person journey to track down Carmen's family turning into a three-person trip.

"I will always be amazed at the growth of Sylphie," Miranda said as she looked at the hawk. Jake nodded but didn't really think she was one to talk, seeing how her level had also grown significantly.

### **[Human – lvl 158]**

She was nearly at his own level. Jake knew a large reason for this was her profession leveling damn quickly, but she also clearly farmed some class levels here and there. If Jake had not just gotten a lot of fast levels, he would be way behind. He was also certain Carmen had to have surpassed him in level by now.

Not that Jake was worried. In fact, he found the sentiment exciting. He had never feared not being the strongest, and if everyone else got more powerful, didn't that just mean he had more people to fight?

Sylphie felt his thoughts and squirmed herself free as she screeched in approval. He felt her intentions, and he was more than happy to oblige when the time was right.

"She is a real talent, isn't she," Jake said to Miranda as he smiled, Sylphie once more letting out a ree of agreement. "I am going to head over to Arnold now to check what information he has gained on the locations of any Primas and the route to this port city."

"Have a nice journey. I will remain here in case Carmen shows up. Not that I doubt we won't both notice her arrival, she isn't exactly the stealthy type," Miranda answered with a chuckle.

With that, Jake got up and headed off to the Fort. He teleported together with Sylphie, who had decided to stay with him, and reached the now buzzing city within a few minutes of leaving Miranda's office. The teleportation circles had been moved yet another time as Jake looked towards the central citadel and saw that the metal sphere had expanded not just in width but in height as the mad scientist had obviously noticed he was running out of horizontal real estate.



As he looked towards the metal sphere, he faintly felt the odd box that had been forced upon him vibrate within his necklace, dispelling all doubt that Arnold was truly related to it. Jake just had a hard time figuring out how the many-eyed freak of a Void Dweller was related to a mad scientist. Well, besides the entire theme of madness.

*Oh well, I guess I can just ask him.*

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## Chapter 450: Comprehending the Incomprehensible

"So, Arnold, what made you decide to get blessed and enter a pact with some sort of otherworldly being of the void that usually turns people insane merely by laying their eyes upon it?"

Jake had barely entered the sphere of metal and made his way to the mad scientist before he popped the question burning in his mind. He hadn't even taken out the creepy cube yet. Jake had just been invited in by Arnold's assistant and walked into his workshop asking about his Void God pal first-thing.

Arnold, to his credit, didn't get fazed and didn't even look up from his workbench as he answered: "By all estimates, being blessed by a god is superior to not being blessed by one, and the offered benefits outstripped all other offers at the time."

It was the kind of answer Jake had expected, but he still pressed further. "But... have you seen this god?"

"Naturally," Arnold nodded, still unbothered as his hands kept working.

"And? No comments on the appearance of a floating thing of infinite eyeballs?"

"The appearance of Oras shifts according to the observer," Arnold shook his head. "I saw not an eye but a string of numbers. All perceptions one can have are related to the act of observing. You saw a representation of a visual organ while I saw a language able to relay what is observed."

"Are you trying to tell me you see the world as being made up of numbers or what?" Jake asked further, wondering if Arnold thought he lived in a simulation or something.

"No. Just that all can be reduced to numbers. Even the system itself," Arnold nonchalantly answered. He soon stopped his work and looked up at Jake. "I do not believe you have come here to discuss divine alignments?"

"No, I came to ask about something else... okay, just one more question, do you talk to Oras?" Jake couldn't hold himself back from asking.

"Talk? No. Communicate? Yes. Conversation through spoken words such as the one we are having right now is a severely limited and highly inefficient way to relay information from one source to another. The communication thus happens through images, arrays, patterns, and formulas, which is far more efficient and helpful," the scientist explained.

Jake couldn't help but imagine the two biggest nerds in the multiverse talking with each other by using god damn formulas to spell out stuff. But... Jake began to understand how Arnold could deal with Oras. "Okay, final question. What is Oras to you?"

He had a hunch and wanted to confirm it.

"Unknown as of yet," Arnold shrugged.

"What is your best guess?"

"Knowing when you don't know something is knowledge in itself. I don't need to guess when I know I can't comprehend something yet. I still have many steps to understand before I can comprehend a being such as Oras, making my lack of comprehending the creature a natural conclusion," Arnold answered. "The human mind is limited in scope, and we must accept there are some things we are not meant to understand. However, that doesn't mean we can't try to comprehend them and observe the impact they have on phenomena we can see. Through those observations and evolution brought upon us by the system, perhaps one day we can transcend our current limits. But that day has yet to come."

Jake nodded along as he kind of got it. He remembered talking to an old acquaintance from school during a reunion who was studying physics at the time. The guy talked about quantum mechanics and how there were so many things we simply didn't understand and concepts that just seemed beyond the human mind to comprehend.

Yet he also talked of tools to measure what these incomprehensible things did. He talked about how humans tried to make theories and formulas to explain what happened, even in situations where imagination had long conceded.

Jake didn't really get it... but he did get the simplified explanation Arnold gave.

"Humans couldn't see ultraviolet light before the system, yet we could make devices that could. We couldn't see gravity, but we could measure what it did. That has changed

now, as the body has evolved to, in many ways, become the best measuring device in existence and the mind the best computer to simulate hypotheses and confirm theory. I have already become able to understand flows of energy, comprehend patterns not understandable to the human mind before, and I am certain you are the same. Your senses now also encompass mana. You can feel the flow of energies within your own body, and even metaphysical concepts are now understandable – something we couldn't even observe before the system. In due time, even a being like Oras will be understandable as our scopes expand."

It was the most Jake had ever heard Arnold talk, and he actually heard some passion in his voice. Jake felt like he had gotten a far better understanding of Arnold during this brief talk and, in concert, also understood Oras a bit better.

Arnold was just a damn nerd, and Oras was a nerd-loving knowledge-seeker, AKA also a mega-nerd. Simple as that. At least, that is how Jake chose to summarize it.

"Anyway, I brought this for you," Jake finally said as he pulled out the weird box the eldritch abomination of eyes had given him.

Arnold stared for a while as he asked. "I am uncertain why you brought me a barrel."

Jake quickly reacted as he opened the barrel and pulled out the bundle of cloth containing the box. "I would advise you to close your eyes or something. Looking at this thing is highly unpleasant."

He followed his own advice as he began unwrapping the bundle. Arnold reacted by taking out a pair of spectacles and putting those on. Jake was anticipating the man to fall over or grasp his head in pain when the box was revealed, but he just stood there and looked at it.

"Ah. A puzzle box. Thank you," Arnold just said as he went over and took it off Jake's hands. Jake himself just stood there with closed eyes as Arnold carried it over to a glass container and put it inside.

"I have contained it now," Arnold said, making Jake open his eyes, and instinctively he looked towards the box.

He saw it clear as day as it was within a display case of sorts. It looked like only a thin layer of glass separated the cube and himself, yet he felt no headache but could inspect it freely. The box was just black without any patterns on it, and there were no shifting eyes or weird energy surrounding it. It was just a black box, with its only extraordinary feature being how black it was.

Jake kept staring at it a bit as he just put it out of his mind, seriously not wanting to bother with it anymore. "So, Primas."

Arnold nodded as he moved his hand and a large screen appeared on one of the walls displaying a map. Jake instantly saw a few familiar markings on it. Haven, Skyggen, Sanctdomo, and several other cities he recognized were marked on it, as well as some noticeable landmarks such as the Insect Plains and the large mountain Jake had passed on the way to Skyggen, now dubbed the Frostpeak Mountain.

Waving his hand again, the scientist made a few areas light up. At the same time, the map drew attention to a small mark at the far side of it, right at the edge of a large mass of nothingness – the ocean, Jake assumed.

The lit-up areas were all on the way to this marking, and based on the distance, Jake saw it was about four times as far as his journey to Skyggen had been. Luckily there appeared to be other settlements along the way, but the final stretch looked like it had to be passed by foot.

“The highlighted areas are ones where the energy signatures corresponding to Primas have been detected. This indicates they either live there or have lived there previously. Based on the signals and times of death of the eagle Prima and the monkey you have slain previously, we have a rough estimate of this Prima energy half-life. Primas all give off unique energy, same as races such as humans or elementals of specific affinities,” Arnold explained.

Jake nodded along, knowing this already. Every single living thing had an energy signature entirely unique to themselves, but the same races also shared some common traits. This was all tied to Records, and needless to say, then all humans had the Records of being humans. In the same vein, all Primas had the Records of being Primas, making that the thing Jake would use to track them down.

“I have also marked zones with creatures of interest and the fastest routes to follow,” Arnold further explained. The source of this content is *novel* ♦ *fire* ♦ *net*

Looking at the map and the level of detail, Jake couldn't help but ask: “How did you map this? Satellites?”

“No. I have attempted launches, but the upper layers of the sky have proven impossible to break through with my current methods. Even that is secondary to making anything able to survive in space for a prolonged period without getting destroyed. This map was done with drones flying approximately ten kilometers in the air, just below the dense cover of clouds.”

“Must have been quite the operation,” Jake commented.

“An ongoing one,” Arnold just said as he motioned for Jake to follow. “I have also worked further on the requested weapon. However, as of yet, it isn't ready.”

Arnold opened a container as a slick Nanoblade was revealed. It was just the blade, but Jake could practically feel the energy infused into it. It was as thin as ever too, and Jake wondered what it needed to be ready.

“The blade is mostly done, and the box you brought should help me finalize the product. We both share the fact that Perception is our primary stat, and I aim to infuse the Nanoblade with abilities taking advantage of that,” he explained.

Jake nodded along but suddenly got a very bad feeling when he heard Arnold mention the box. Wouldn't that mean Jake would eventually run around with a cursed blade seeking to consume all of existence in one hand and a blade forged using methods passed down by some eldritch monstrosity in the other?

Actually, on second thought, that sounded pretty cool. “It looks damn impressive already. Keep up the good work, man.”

Arnold nodded as he handed Jake a tablet of sorts, not unlike one of the ones Arnold normally ran around with. “Within this tablet is general information of the areas you will encounter on your way, such as settlements and noteworthy territories of certain creatures. The map is naturally also included, and if you hold onto the tablet, it will track your location on said map. Any further questions?”

“Any advice on the journey?”

“Avoid the red zones or explore them carefully. Those are areas where I have detected C-grades,” Arnold answered, adding. “However, you will have to pass such an area to reach the port city. This place is known as the Grand Mangrove River, and it does contain Primas. Plural. However, I would suggest quickly passing as it also contains C-grades. Once more, plural. Flying over is not an option either. The reason for this should become rather obvious when you get near there.”

Jake checked the map and did notice a river-like area that seemed to cut through the terrain between the city closest to the port and the port itself.

“Got it. Do you need me to bring you fragments from Primas too?” Jake also asked. He hoped Carmen had all hers, as it could get a bit tight on time if he had to-

“No. I shall acquire all I need in cooperation with the City Lord,” he answered, shaking his head.

“Wait, Miranda got three already?” Jake asked, surprised. She hadn't mentioned that even after they had spoken for so long. He knew Sylphie had two fragments, but that Miranda had three?

“No, we have four between us. The last two are already in progress of being acquired during this very moment,” Arnold just said, not explaining further on that topic. “Also,

head towards the east for the Ambermill settlement. A powerful individual is currently passing through with an energy signature matching that of a member of Valhal. You intend to go with that woman, correct?"

To preserve his pride, Jake didn't ask about the Prima fragments further. From the last sentence, he could also see Arnold really wanted him to leave by now, so Jake didn't want to overstay his welcome more than necessary.

Once outside of the big metal dome, he met up with Sylphie again, who hadn't wanted to go into the dome. Apparently, she had tried to sneak in and cause havoc in the past, and Arnold had somehow managed to throw her out using some built-in defenses, impressing Jake. He still got the feeling Sylphie could have broken out and caused destruction, but neither party wanted that. This had inadvertently led to Sylphie really disliking Arnold but also kind of respecting him.

Another reason she respected him was explained as he got outside and saw her. Jake found Sylphie eating out of the hand of Arnold's assistant, who had kept an eye on her in a small building outside. Arnold was smart, after all, and knew bribery with food was a true and tested tactic when it came to placating powerful beasts.

"Sylphie, are you ready to head out?" he asked the hawk that was happily snacking away.

"Ree!" she answered with enthusiasm, flapping her wings. After a quick screech at Arnold's assistant thanking her for the food, Sylphie flew up and landed on his head again.

"Arnold found Carmen, so how about we go meet her on the way?"

That got another happy flap from Sylphie as the man and bird headed towards this little place called Ambermill.

Once his visitor was gone, and he was alone, Arnold activated all of the interior barriers to seal off the dome. At the same time, the entire laboratory shifted as the sensitive devices were retracted into the walls, leaving only himself, a single worktable, and a display case with the gift from Oras within.

Bringing the case to the center of the room, Arnold activated a small laser and cut off the top of the light-refracting glass. Just a hole large enough to put a finger through would be enough. He moved back as he took out a chair and sat down in it as he risked losing his balance with what happened next.

On the ceiling, a single laser appeared and fired down onto the cube, and the very next moment, it was as if Arnold had been transported into an entirely different world. The light reflected off the cube distorted all senses and made him perceive reality as different from what it was. Yet even if it changed, a pattern remained.

As he sat there, finding himself surrounded by lights with millions of colors and shapes he did not even know the name of, he began to decipher whatever mystery his Patron god had left within the cube. It was the type of mystery that perhaps didn't even have a solution, but merely attempting it would lead to newfound discoveries. Or, perhaps the conclusions would be based solely on the eye of the beholder.

Either way, there were patterns, and a theory adequately explaining this pattern could be made. There was meaning somewhere in the madness, and if there wasn't, then Arnold would just have to refine his theory until it was correct anyway.

Such was his Path. There was always a pattern, always a formula to describe reality, always an answer. With the system, everything was possible, even understanding the system itself.

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