

The Primal Hunter

Chapter 501: Girl Time & Guy Time

Irin took the lead as she led Jake and the others toward the location of the dungeon. It wasn't as simple as Jake had thought it would be to get there. He had kind of just assumed it would just be another gate, and then boom, they would be teleported straight in front of it.

However, reality was a bit different. They went through a gate and appeared in a small waystation of sorts within an utterly massive damp cavern with the gate itself within a structure carved into the stone walls.

"We are currently within the first layer of Primordial-4. This part of the layer is usually safe in this area, and we shouldn't expect any C-grades to appear. The dungeon itself is placed deeper within this cavern. In case any of you are wondering, then not placing the dungeons in natural environments more suitable for the dungeon in question would just be moronic and waste resources unnecessarily. You need the mana density to reach a certain level, too, for the dungeon core to operate properly. This dungeon is also on the older side, making its placement a bit more inconvenient than usual," the succubus explained once they made it out of the small waystation. Jake saw that only a single person was present there, inside a hidden meditation chamber of sorts. While he could not be sure, he had a feeling this person was firmly in the C-grade and acted as a defender of sorts.

Not thinking deeper about the issue, Jake followed Irin as they began making it deeper into the cavern. The place was utterly huge, and when they made it out of a small cave system, they came to an even larger chasm-like cavern where Jake couldn't even see the ceiling. Below them were blue pools of water with beasts and monsters of all kinds everywhere, fighting and bathing in the water.

Jake felt that the water was some kind of natural treasure or perhaps the by-product of one. But this trip was not to collect water or fight beasts but to head to the dungeon. Besides, the beasts below were only around 120 to 140, so they were not worth his time at all.

"The blue water in the pools may look attractive but is actually completely useless by itself when it comes to alchemy. Instead, we allow the beasts to soak in it and refine the energy so that when they are killed, their cores can be harvested," Irin explained once more, as both Reika and Bastilla looked curiously at the happenings far below. "Ah, but some members of the Order with heritages that allow them to make use of the pools also come by once in a while, so do watch out if you ever go hunting here. Would be unfortunate to kill another member of the Order."

Irin gave a few more explanations of the local environment and what one could expect to find there if one decided to go exploring at one point or another. Jake considered if he should go at some point but probably wouldn't.

On the topic of getting to the dungeon, they had chosen to fly there as that was faster. There were some flying creatures in the cavern too, but none were threats. Hell, none of these flying monsters even bothered the party for one simple reason – Jake wasn't trying to hide his presence at all. The beasts all avoided them as they instinctually knew not to mess with them. Not that it was necessarily even needed for Jake to be the one to scare them off. Draskil's aura was plenty scary all on its own.

"The dungeon is located at the end of this cavern, pretty much just straight ahead. It shouldn't take us more than half an hour to an hour to get there," Irin said with a smile. "I do not expect us to meet any beasts or foes that are of any danger to us."

Draskil turned to Jake once he heard this and smiled. With a toothy grin, he spoke: "So, how fast is your flying speed?"

Jake wasn't surprised in the least as he smirked in response. "Are you looking for a race?"

The dragonkin didn't even respond as his wings began glowing with energy. Jake, in response, slightly raised his foot and got ready to step down. "No one says it needs to be flying, right?"

Draskil shook his head. "Loser owes a drink."

With those words, he exploded with power and took off. Jake threw a glance at Irin and got a nod in response as he stepped down and warped through space. He appeared over half a kilometer away before stepping down again. Slowly building up momentum, he chased after Draskil, who had a small headstart.

Irinixis sighed as she saw the two of them run off like two children let loose. She had been working in the Order for a long time now and had managed many individuals... but this was her first time getting such important people as two black tokens that even had a Malefic Dragonkin with a Divine Blessing among them.

Quite honestly, it was all luck. Then Humanoid Resources assigned managerial staff to those from the ninety-third universe; the groups they would manage were chosen entirely at random. Most others who handled groups from the new universe had gotten mediocre to slightly above mediocre groups. Having a few gold tokens would be considered exceptional, and a few of her colleagues had bragged about it.

So when Irinixis had been assigned two black tokens, she was ecstatic. Not to misunderstand, she still was ecstatic to be their primary contact person. This was a huge opportunity for her. There was just the minor issue that she felt completely out of

her depth with both of them. She was used to powerful young masters throwing their weight around and caring about face above all else, but these two just did whatever. They were more like children than highly talented geniuses blessed by the Malefic One.

Perhaps their laidback attitudes are part of the reason for their growth, Irin thought, unsure if that could be the case. Either way, understanding Draskil seemed impossible at the current time, but as for the human? She had a great opportunity right there and then.

“So girls, I guess it is just us till we reach the dungeon. Better get going so we don’t make those two wait too long,” Irin said to the two of them with a smile.

“Let us,” the woman called Reika agreed. She began condensing a board of ice that she stood upon as a mode of transportation, having just flown using pure mana before. The beastfolk woman followed as she primed her wings with energy, Irin doing the same.

The three of them set flight, Irin being the fastest, but not by much. She was surprised at the level of magic deployed by the human, especially considering her limited time to train. *She will advance to a silver token within not that long simply due to her talent in magic,* Irin reckoned. *I should not doubt the judgment of a black token... Jake believed she was worth bringing along and knows things I do not.*

As for her beastfolk companion, she clearly had an Agility-focused race due to her feline heritage, making her on the faster side. She was about as fast as Reika, which in reality was just proof of Reika’s talent, considering she was firmly in the mage category.

While flying, there was no reason not to get to know one another as they would spend some time together in the dungeon anyway. It wasn’t like they were in a real hurry either, as Jake and Draskil could just spend some guy time together while they spent some girl time.

“Man, those two sure are something,” the beastfolk woman commented as she looked at Irin. “I am called Bastilla, by the way; a pleasure to meet you. Are you one of those management demons?”

“I am,” Irin replied, not thinking it worthwhile to further elaborate.

“Damn. That dragonkin one of those you help manage? What is he anyway, a gold token like that Jake guy?” Bastilla asked, confusing Irin.

“Neither of them has gold tokens?” she exclaimed, noticing Reika looked a bit embarrassed.

“Wait,” Bastilla said, glaring at Reika. “You said he was gold, though. With his own residence and all that.”

"I... didn't want to... you know..." Reika muttered, Irin finding it a bit endearing as she smiled, fully understanding the situation immediately.

"She didn't want to come off as a braggart and downplayed her connections. To clarify, both Jake and Draskil have black tokens and are both blessed by the Malefic One, the dragonkin – as you rightly pointed out – a Malefic Dragonkin carrying a Divine Blessing," Irin explained.

Bastilla looked weird for a moment before she opened her mouth. "For real? Isn't that like... a big deal? A super big deal?"

"Anyone with a black token is considered extraordinary and big deals, as you so eloquently put it," Irin said in confirmation.

"I am beginning to feel the pressure here," Bastilla shuddered. "Why am I part of this group again?"

"That I am not certain of," Irin answered as she looked at Reika, who had some time to collect herself.

"As Irinixis said before, I didn't want to show off, you know? It is also a bit embarrassing he is so much more skilled than me despite us spending an equal amount of time doing alchemy and learning energy control," Reika confessed. "It is infuriating..."

Irin just shook her head. "Listening to all of you complain is infuriating. That you managed to get bronze tokens is already more than the vast, vast majority of the multiverse can ever achieve, and you are both early on your Paths. So just keep working hard, and you can go far. Meanwhile, I am hoping to make those two black tokens my ticket to C-grade as, currently, it is still a toss-up if I will make it."

And wasn't that the truth. Irin had been D-grade for close to a century and had only recently gained a single level. The path to C-grade was even harder, and while she did have some confidence, it wasn't a sure thing. She downplayed it a bit to the two girls, but she was truthful that she wanted to make Jake and Draskil – or at least one of them – her ticket to C-grade. It was what her profession was all about, after all. As for if she would also progress her succubus race... now that was a whole other question.

"Still didn't answer why I was asked to join," Bastilla muttered, making Irin refocus on the conversation.

Reika just sighed. "In all honesty? I think the primary factor was proximity. Jake wanted a fifth, and there you were."

Irin nearly flailed a bit while flying as she heard the reason. *I truly don't understand these geniuses... but I should take the chance to.*

“Reika, I have been wondering about the planet you and Lord Thayne hail from,” she began with a smile. “I strive to know more of those I am assigned, so I would love to learn more about you two and your origins.”

It was a perfect time to learn about at least one of the two geniuses when he wasn't within earshot.

The two “geniuses” managed to turn what should have taken half an hour into a less than a five-minute trip. Jake had used One Step Thousand Miles, while Draskil had a legendary movement skill related to flying. Jake won out in the skill department when it came to traveling as One Step was a line of skills used for traveling and not necessarily for combat, while Draskil's skill was more combat-oriented with a focus on instantaneous movement to escape and attack.

However, the level disparity meant that Draskil could make up for it. He was just faster, and Jake failed to catch up in the short time it took to reach the dungeon. Without the headstart Draskil had, Jake could have likely caught up.

Ah, but Jake still won. The race was to the dungeon... and Draskil flew straight by it while Jake picked up the unique mana signature emanating from a hole in the ground. Draskil quickly noticed Jake hadn't followed and put two and two together.

Which led to their current situation.

“I was faster,” Draskil said.

“That wasn't what we were competing about. It was who would make it to the dungeon first. Which I did,” Jake argued.

“Who cares about who got here first when I was faster,” Draskil sneered, clearly dissatisfied.

“If it wasn't about who got here first, then why get a headstart? And didn't I slowly catch up to you?” Jake argued further, feeling like he had Draskil cornered.

“Does not matter. I was the fastest to pass by the entrance and won,” Draskil refused to back down.

“If you run past the finish line, it doesn't count,” Jake smirked. “And if it wasn't for me, you would still be flying right now.”

“She said half an hour,” Draskil then decided to blame a third party. For more chapters visit *novel·fire·net*

“Sounds like bad excuses,” Jake laughed. “Just take the loss.”

“I didn’t lose.”

Jake was beginning to believe that this was not an argument that could be won as the other party simply chose to deny reality. Okay, in some fairness, all Draskil had asked was how fast Jake was, and there were no formal rules, but Jake only found it reasonable that their race was to the dungeon.

Having decided to not pursue it further, he properly inspected the chasm the hole had led into containing the dungeon. The entrance to the dungeon looked incredibly out of place as it was just a black metal door embedded in a stone wall, and it looked like one could easily break it or take it away. However, with further inspection, it became clear the gates were somehow entirely locked in place.

Jake inspected them with Draskil still moping, proving that he did recognize his loss. He just was just too shy or prideful to admit it. At least that is how Jake chose to interpret the actions of the dragonkin. Feeling good about himself, Jake began to consider ways to pass the time as they waited for the rest of their party to arrive.

About forty minutes went by before the others made it to the dungeon, and in the meantime, Jake had time to craft a batch of health potions just for good measure. Draskil had also gotten bored and began to meditate.

“Sorry for the wait,” Irin apologized when she made it into the chasm along with Bastilla and Reika.

Draskil just made a slightly dissatisfied noise while Jake waved it off. Having no need to exchange more words, they all went over to the gate, and as Jake lay his hand upon it, a system message appeared.

Dungeon: Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns.

Requirements to enter: D-grade

Requirements to enter met

WARNING: Only 5 challengers are allowed per party attempting the dungeon.

Enter Dungeon?

Y/N

Not a single one of them hesitated as all five entered the dungeon. Jake felt excitement as he was teleported by the system, but his excitement died instantly when he appeared in the dungeon.

His smile faded, and his eyes opened in horror as he gazed out upon the first floor and what they could expect this dungeon to contain. “Fuck me,” Jake exclaimed out loud, realizing this whole thing was a mistake. Because he saw them.

Mushrooms.

So many fucking mushrooms.

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Chapter 502: Mushrooms... So Many Mushrooms.

Jake had to question if it all was just one cruel joke that everyone but himself was in on. Had Villy put them up to his? Was he the one who had tipped off Draskil to choose this dungeon? Maybe influenced Irin? There had to be more to this than pure randomness. Because what Jake saw was just a hellscape.

The expansive cavern Jake stood before contained a large forest, but it had massive mushrooms rather than trees. The underbrush was just moss and mushrooms, mushroom spores covered the sky and floated in the air, and there were even mushrooms growing on the mushrooms.

And if that wasn't enough, then the first movement Jake saw was of a large mushroom with mushroom arms and mushroom legs, holding a mushroom shield and wielding a mushroom stalk as a club. The figure was about three meters tall and on the bulkier end, but was overall clearly a low-tier creature, even if its level was decent.

[Mushroom Man Warrior – lvl 171]

“I hate this place,” Jake said as the first person to speak after entering the dungeon.

“Smells like shit,” Draskil snorted, clearly not enjoying the mushrooms either.

Irin looked a bit confused while Reika understood Jake's hatred. Not because she carried it herself, but because Jake had ranted plenty of times to her about the evil shrooms. Bastilla was even more confused than Irin and just asked.

“Why? Aren't mushrooms great for poisons?” she spoke in her infinite ignorance.

“Great for poisoning people who don't know better too,” Draskil muttered before looking at Jake. “We kill everything?”

“Wait!” Irin cut in. “Please do not destroy the corpses too badly as we may need them for materials or to get their life cores. Do we have anyone here with scavaging or dismantling abilities, by the way?”

Bastilla raised her hand. Jake was a bit surprised but didn’t show it. Irin looked at Jake momentarily with approval before nodding. “Very well, then you take care of dismantling all the corpses.”

“I will begin to collect materials and search for them then,” Reika said, but Jake decided to cut in as he looked at Draskil.

“Will killing any of these mushrooms even give you any experience worth mentioning?”

“No, but I would enjoy it,” Draskil answered bluntly.

“Totally fair. I was just thinking that we should have Reika and Bastilla kill those here on the earlier floors while we collect stuff and pass the test. Besides, we have four whole weeks total, and we both know we won’t need that time, and if we do need the time, it is due to the far more time-consuming alchemy aspect and not due to killing things slowly, so better you help me out,” Jake said.

Draskil clearly didn’t like the idea but grunted in approval anyway. “Fine... but if any of those damn mushrooms get in my way, I kill them.”

“Again, totally fair,” Jake nodded with a smile before turning to Bastilla and Reika. “Time for you two to put on your hunting boots and get killing.”

“Alright,” Reika agreed without arguing.

“I... I’m not really the fighting type of gal?” Bastilla said, seeming a bit shy for the first time since they met. She was obviously not a fan.

“Too bad, but sometimes you gotta fight to survive. You are a beastfolk. You are innately a fighter. Just tap into some of that primal instinct and go rip those damn shrooms to pieces,” Jake said encouragingly.

It wasn’t like it would be dangerous either way. Jake had a very good feel for the mushroom warrior, and it was clear it was damn weak, just as one would expect from a mushroom man. Mushrooms all sucked, after all.

“Okay...” Bastilla agreed after a comforting look from Reika.

“I shall help guard them while they hunt,” Irin added.

“No,” Jake shut the sentiment down. “Unless some hidden boss or a horde of those shroomy fucks pops out of the ground, it is their fights, and no one interferes.”

Bastilla looked like she wanted to protest, but Reika spoke up first. "I must agree. It is no proper fight if we have someone constantly guarding us. I have not fought for a while, and it is about time I get in some proper practice. Without a true element of danger, it wouldn't be as worthwhile."

Jake nodded in approval, seeing some of that Noboru blood leak through. Irin looked a bit concerned, but Jake wasn't. One had to remember that while Reika was not considered a peak fighter on Earth, then she was considered a single tier behind. And the peak fighters of Earth were out of the ordinary, to say the least. Follow current novels on [novel•fire•net](http://novelfire.net)

They all watched as Reika pulled out a white scabbard and pulled out a sword. Jake felt the immense cold emanate from it as her mana stirred and infused the blade further. "I am ready."

Her aura had changed and was now both colder and sharper than before. Irin looked surprised, while Draskil seemed far more approving than before. Bastilla was the most surprised as she just stared before collecting herself. "Fine... let's go."

They all watched as Reika took the lead and approached the mushroom man. White cold air revolved around her as she stepped forward and charged. It looked like a simple charge, but Jake saw how the concept of ice enveloped her feet in icy mist, making her footwork faster and far more unpredictable.

The Mushroom Man Warrior turned to the human twenty or so levels below himself... itself... whatever. The mushroom swung his club, displaying a respectable amount of Strength and speed. Reika didn't even flinch as she dodged the attack and swept her blade upwards, leaving a cold trail. The mushroom man was cut deep into his mushy flesh and made an odd roaring sound as he just kept swinging the club haphazardly.

Reika took a bit to really get in the zone, and Jake saw noticeable improvements in her movements with every exchange. Having seen her fight before, Jake knew she was just getting into the swing of it. The mushroom man was nothing more than a training dummy for her to rekindle her fighting instincts after a long time of just doing alchemy and living in safety.

It took her only five minutes until Jake saw she was done with her opponent. She took a single step back from her opponent and fanned the sword in a circular pattern as it left afterimages behind. These afterimages froze in the air and turned into blades of ice that Reika sent barraging towards the mushroom man. It was impaled by dozens of them before Reika sheathed her blade again, and the moment she did, all the frozen blades exploded, blowing the body of the shroomy fuck apart into seven frozen parts.

"That felt refreshing," Reika smiled as she walked back to them, not a single trace of dirt on her clothes.

“You know how to fight. You are skilled,” Draskil said, speaking to Reika for the first time.

“I try my best,” Reika bowed. “But I still have long to go before I would call myself skilled.”

“Don’t compare yourself to the old man,” Jake joked.

“Who is this old man, if I may ask?” Irin asked curiously.

Jake gave Reika a look, signaling that if she wanted it to be shared, it was up to her. She nodded and chose to answer.

“My great-grandfather and a true swordsman,” Reika answered with a smile, clearly proud.

“Is he strong?” Draskil asked again.

“Yes,” Reika just answered. “He taught me just a little bit of swordsmanship, and it has served me more than well.”

Draskil looked like he wanted to ask more, but Jake cut in. “Anyway, how about we actually do the dungeon now? As you can see, then Reika knows how to handle herself, so let’s leave the two roomies and go find out how to pass this floor and get to the more exciting parts of this accursed place. Hopefully somewhere with no mushrooms.”

Irin nodded in agreement, even if she did throw a few more curious glances at Reika. “Let us. We should look for the passageway to the next floor. The requirements to pass must be there.”

They better be, Jake thought. So far, all he had seen in the dungeon was mushrooms, and he wanted to pass this floor fast. The system message when he entered the dungeon wasn’t very useful either.

You have entered the dungeon: Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns.

Objective: Pass at least four floors of the Indigo Caverns within the 28-day limit.

The only new information here was that you only needed to pass four floors to complete the dungeon, meaning everything after that was optional for better rewards. The time limit of four weeks was likely there to ensure that people couldn’t just enter, find out what they needed to do, and then leave the dungeon to make detailed plans or spend insane amounts of time testing and experimenting until a solution was found. Sure, one could leave the dungeon, but Jake knew that time kept passing inside even after one left. At least it did so for a period of time, making it unfeasible. There was also one more thing... Jake couldn’t find any exit. Not that he planned on leaving, but he had kind of

gotten used to there being an exit from where they entered, while in this dungeon, there was just a cave wall.

Leaving Reika and Bastilla behind, Jake, Irin, and Draskil flew further into the dungeon floor. The first floor wasn't actually as big as Jake had initially thought, but only a few dozen or so square kilometers at most, with two kilometers to the mushroom-covered ceiling.

With that in mind, it didn't take them long to find the passage to the next floor. It was a gate like the one they had entered the dungeon through, and in front of the door was a large cauldron with a lid on it. Furthermore, on the wall beside the gate, an inscription could be found.

An inscription with pretty easy instructions.

Create three different kinds of poisons of at least inferior rarity from the materials found on this floor and place them all in the cauldron. In order to open the lid of the cauldron, at least one hundred Mushroom Man Warriors must be slain.

Progress: Mushroom Man Warriors killed: 3/100. Poisons placed in the cauldron: 0/3

As expected, the first floor was easy peasy. They just had to kill a hundred Mushroom Men, and with Reika and Bastilla already killing three, it would get done pretty quickly by itself. So all Jake had to do was to make the three poisons.

"Well, this is easy enough. Just get some different ingredients, and I will toss them together and make a few different poisons," Jake said.

None of them had expected much difficulty to begin with, and all set out again. Draskil and Jake both had Sense of the Malefic Viper, and Irin also had her own skills to search for valuable items. Amidst the many normal mushrooms spread throughout the forest were many special ones that counted as items, and Jake also quickly noticed how peculiar the fungi were.

The spores in the air all around them at all times weren't just for ambiance and released from the mushrooms – it was a unique feature of the dungeon and something all the ingredients there relied on. Nothing could be taken out of the dungeon without wilting, and Jake noticed how these spores even seemed to "enter" his spatial storage whenever he put a mushroom in it.

Jake also became aware of this from eating a lot of mushrooms. He hated mushrooms, but he still recognized that eating them was a good idea due to their uniqueness. Every single mushroom inside the dungeon could not be found on the outside but was specifically made for the dungeon.

Pulling out some old tricks, Jake made mushroom soup and went around just eating as he collected stuff. In the distance, he heard fighting, and at times a dark green pulse of power went through the floor when Draskil killed a Mushroom Man Warrior that got in his way.

What was a little disappointing was that all the mushrooms were common rarity at most, but it had to get better as they progressed through the floors, right? He damn well hoped so, as finding nearly only inferior rarity stuff sucked.

After an hour of eating and searching, Jake headed back to the passageway and plopped his ass down to do some alchemy. He had already gotten some ideas, and quite frankly, it was an easy job anyway.

If this had been before Jake had ever gone to the Order, it would have taken him a lot longer to confidently say he could successfully create three poisons that easily, but his general knowledge had come far. Taking out some mushrooms and some of the moss, Jake tossed it all into the cauldron along with some purified water and a few drops of his blood to act as a catalyst.

Irin returned and checked in on him ten minutes or so later as Jake sat there and let the cauldron simmer. She clearly didn't want to disturb him, but that was a needless worry.

"Found good things?" Jake asked.

"Not really," Irin answered after getting the go-ahead to talk. "This is the first floor. There aren't really ingredients I think anyone would consider good."

"Fair," Jake said.

"Are you confident in making the three poisons by yourself?" she asked.

"Well," Jake said as he dispelled his Alchemical Flame. "Got one already."

He opened the cauldron and nodded as he took out a few bottles. Once everything was in them, he inspected the final product.

[Weak Necrotic Mushroom Poison (Inferior)] – A poison created from the unique mushrooms of the Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns dungeon with necrotic properties, infecting and killing off biological material in the affected area. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are somewhat difficult to heal. The poison takes effect upon any contact with any biological material.

Jake instantly knew that even if it had added a bunch of things about the dungeon, this was really just normal necrotic poison. He also knew he could bring it outside no problem and use it like normal.

“That was fast,” Irin exclaimed.

“Of course,” Jake laughed a bit as he began his second concoction. Looking at the engraving, he saw that the hundred Mushroom Man Warriors were already dead, and the dungeon cauldron was open. To test, Jake tossed a bottle in the cauldron and saw the progress tick from 0/3 to 1/3.

“Well then, second poison,” Jake smiled as he threw in the ingredients. “In the meantime, can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?” Irin asked curiously.

“Can you roast the mushrooms or something to eat? The taste is driving me nuts,” Jake said spitefully.

Irin surprisingly smiled as she took out a small canister of sorts along with a large bowl. She then deposited all her collected mushrooms in the bowl and opened the container as an orange liquid covered the mushrooms. She tossed the mix a bit before nodding.

“Try one now,” she offered, and Jake promptly responded by extending a string of mana. He swooped up a mushroom and put it in his mouth as his eyes opened wide. How could he have forgotten the secret to making horrible salads edible?

Tasty dressing.

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Chapter 503: Truly Evil Dungeon Design

It didn't get better. Jake had hoped that the second floor would be less mushy, but it wasn't to be. In fact, there were even more mushrooms, and some of them were even aggressive and attacked them. Mushroom Man Mages had also been added to the list of enemies, usually wandering with their warrior kin.

The second floor ended up proceeding much like the first. Jake hadn't even needed any materials gathered by others from the first floor, and he and Draskil had ended up just having a mushroom feast prepared by Irin, who shared that she had a skill related to cooking. Why would a succubus have a skill related to cooking, one might ask? Jake didn't truly know, but he did know that he and Draskil both liked her better after she began making their mushroom meals far tastier. Perhaps she had only become a cook

to integrate herself with others not only through social interactions but through their stomachs. A truly insidious strategy that Jake was totally fine with.

Anyway, the second floor was also rather dull. All it required was for the party to kill at least two hundred mushroom men and craft at least three different resource-restoring potions using the materials found in the dungeon. Jake once more did all the crafting while Reika got some combat done with an already tired-looking Bastilla joining in.

Draskil was just wandering about eating stuff, and Jake did see him at one point juggle three Mushroom Man Warriors in boredom. No, not juggle in the figurative sense but the literal one as he tossed them up in the air before catching them again.

On a side note, then Jake and the others also finally found the exit to the dungeon. Inside every passageway leading to the next floor was an exit that could be used, but it was only available in the passageway. If anyone entered the next floor, the exit would cease to function, and one couldn't go back to earlier floors once one had been successfully passed.

The third floor was once again more of the same, but at least there was something more than mushrooms present. Several flowers and plants had begun to grow together with the mushrooms, and one part even had a small lake with water plants inside. The challenge on the third floor was to craft a poison using the lake water. The poison itself had to retain all the toxic effects of the lake water but without any of the restorative properties. In essence, it was a test of purification rather than true crafting. There was one small snag, though – the water had to also increase in potency enough to be recognized as a common rarity poison.

By default, the water was of inferior rarity, and if the restorative effects were removed, it was questionable if it would even qualify as an item. This floor was the first time Reika proved her skills as she quickly figured out a way to distill the water, and Jake quickly realized that if he then just added some mushrooms also present on the floor, he would be able to make it.

On this floor, Bastilla also had to stop joining in on the combat or at least only fight with Reika. Reika herself was also struggling as the mushroom men got stronger, and the mages and warriors now also had something called defenders, which carried two mushroom shields.

Ah, not that there was any cause for concern if they could pass the floor or even subsequent ones. Draskil still ripped every single opponent apart with ease, and Jake had only killed a few himself who got in his way, all of them with only a few moves with his two katars.

From the fourth floor, the dynamic became more how they initially planned to do the dungeon. Draskil was in charge of the killing, with Bastilla primarily dismantling the corpses using skills Jake had never seen before. Usually, any creature killed only

dropped its core or one other item, but Bastilla could dismantle a corpse and gain far more. Using her skills, most parts of the creature would turn into items of some variety, but her greatest ability was how she could redirect the Records of a slain creature. She could change it so that rather than the orb storing all the energy, it would instead enter another or several other parts of the body. Sure, crafters could already infuse cores into materials from a monster, but Bastilla didn't just infuse the core into something – she infused the whole damn corpse. It was a bit weird seeing an entire mushroom man be reduced to a small piece of white mushroom flesh teeming with energy, but who was Jake to argue with system rules?

Reika and Jake also began to team up from the fourth floor and did all the alchemy. The challenges got quite a bit more complicated, and it was clear that the fourth one had a spike, likely due to being the last required floor one had to pass to complete the dungeon.

Oh yeah! The fourth floor also had a boss. Mushroom Man Commander. It was a bigger than usual mushroom man surrounded by many other mushroom men. Jake needed a piece from the boss to pass the floor, so he had Draskil be nice and not destroy the mushroom too much so Bastilla could still use her skills properly on it.

Needless to say, nothing seen so far could even touch Jake or Draskil. The Mushroom Man Commander had only been level 185 and wasn't even that strong of a D-grade. Jake could likely have killed it with one well-placed Arcane Powershot and one hundred percent killed it with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Draskil also only needed a few moments to kill it with his claws.

Jake had yet to really see how Draskil fought even after going through the floors with him. Seeing the dragonkin kill mushroom men by swiping his claws casually didn't give much insight, but at least did let Jake know Draskil was a melee fighter. Granted, Draskil didn't know Jake's fighting style either, as he had yet to pull out his bow.

Even if the fourth floor was a bit more difficult alchemy-wise than those prior, it still only took Jake and Reika a few hours to find out how to properly combine the Lifecore from the boss monster with the other ingredients. This floor was primarily made hard by only having one real shot at succeeding with the Lifecore, but at least they could practice the craft with lesser Lifecores from the other mushrooms before the real attempt. On the note of crafting, then Jake was the one doing all of the actual alchemy, with Reika taking more of an advisory role. She did still do some crafts, but it was only exploratory ones to figure out stuff for Jake to reference.

Only a bit over twenty-four hours after entering the dungeon, they stepped foot in the passageway to the fifth floor, having officially "completed" the place. They all stopped as a system message appeared before all of them.

You have successfully passed four floors and have officially completed the dungeon.

However, if the quest ends here or not is up to you. Five more floors await you as you delve deeper into the Indigo Caverns, with challenge and opportunity growing hand in hand. Perhaps you may even see what dwells at the bottom of the caverns and obtain the true reward...

Do you wish to continue delving into the Indigo Caverns?

"I must admit... we got here faster than expected," Irin said, shaking her head in slight disbelief. "I had estimated it would take us around two days, maybe closer to three."

Jake had to agree with her assessment... shit had been easier than expected. Granted, it would have taken him a bit longer if he was alone, but Jake could have definitely passed the place solo in between two and three days easily.

"Well, we do have two absolute monsters here," Bastilla muttered.

"Yeah, Reika and Irin are damn beasts at what they do!" Jake agreed, failing to hold himself back from making a joke. The two of them had been incredibly helpful, but it was obvious that the two main contributors had been Jake and Draskil. However, one should not discount the absolutely essential job Irin had.

She made mushrooms actually edible. The succubus did complain at one point about being reduced to a cook but still kept making mushroom feasts nonetheless. Okay, calling it cooking was maybe a bit much as all she did was season the mushrooms. Ah, but it was special seasoning. Not only did it make the mushrooms taste better – it had synergy with Palate of the Malefic Viper.

It made the knowledge obtained more... digestible and allowed Jake and Draskil to absorb it faster. It was a small and near-negligible effect, and the true worth was in making the mushrooms edible, but it was something. Not that the two of them would have cared if all her seasoning did was make mushrooms somewhat taste good as that was sure as hell a requirement because the god damn mushroom nightmare continued floor after floor, only getting worse.

On the note of eating copious amounts of mushrooms, Jake learned that while Draskil was not an alchemist, he still kind of was? He didn't concoct poisons the usual way but instead told Jake how he made it inside his body. He had what could almost be called an organ where he cultivated poisons using Palate and pretty much crafted toxins for him to use on his claws, fangs, and even to refine his blood.

Draskil thus needed to also eat a lot of poisons to both expand the scope and depth of his poison. Jake could only imagine the nightmare if he was the only one eating all that Irin prepared, so he was glad to have someone to share the pain with.

"Are we going to keep up the pace?" Reika asked, ignoring Jake's "praise."

“Yes,” Draskil just stated.

Jake shrugged. “The big bad dragonkin has spoken. I want to reach this final C-grade boss too.”

“Will we actually fight it?” Bastilla asked with a bit of worry.

Draskil and Jake both looked at her and answered in concert. “Yes.” “Yeah.”

They had both killed C-grades before – well, Jake had killed one – so not trying to at least fight it would be silly. Irin had even mentioned how it was weak, so it would be a shame not to.

Having decided to continue, they entered the fifth floor after all agreeing to continue. The system prompt was not really a vote but more just an opportunity to leave, and Irin explained that if anyone did choose to exit, they could get their rewards then and there and be out. The rest of the party could still continue.

This floor was more of the same, even if the difficulty had spiked. Jake decided to finally join in on the action and helped kill some foes as they now had to slay five hundred mushroom men to proceed and craft a weird type of poison Jake had never come across before. A poison that seemed to erode water somehow. Not absorb it, but just make it disappear. It was weird, but Reika came in clutch again and helped find a solution, making the fifth floor take only around ten hours total.

Sixth floor? Same shit, more mushrooms. Took them twenty-two hours as the alchemy challenge was actually quite hard.

The seventh floor was next, but this one was at least different... in a bad way. It was a fucking water level with mer-mushroom men, which looked exactly as abominable as one can imagine. This floor was by far the hardest, and everyone hated it, even those who didn't carry the justified hatred of mushrooms Draskil and Jake did.

Irin complained about her magic feeling weaker and her wings getting soggy, Reika hated how her ice magic sucked in water, Bastilla how she had fur and how she wasn't made for swimming, and Jake because he was a sane human being who knew water levels sucked.

Draskil though... Draskil didn't really hate the water. No, he was more just uncomfortable. Jake wondered why but it got worse as time passed, and Jake finally realized after about half an hour. He was terrified. Jake felt legitimate fear from the mighty dragonkin as he swam in the underground cavern full of water. There had to be a story there, but Jake didn't want to pry. There was a time and a place for everything, and an underground cavern where the likely stronger than him dragonkin was already on edge was definitely not that time and place.

They still passed the dungeon, but it took a grueling two days and three hours. The poison they had to craft was also just a god damn nightmare to make. They had to make a bloody fire affinity poison using only water and earth affinity mushrooms found in the water. This was all while getting chased by horrifying mushroom men with squiggle tails and octopus-like tentacle arms trying to kill them.

Passing the gate to the eighth floor, they all took a small breather in the passageway. They dried off and decided to make camp for the first time there and then to all recover. They had just been running on potions and not really expending any resources due to how easy it was on all the prior floors, but the seventh water level had been hell.

Irin took out a massive party tent of sorts that barely fit in the rather large passageway and pulled out furniture to allow them to sit down and relax.

“I fucking hate water levels,” Jake muttered as he sat on a couch in the large tent. He got a few approving nods as Irin asked inquisitively.

“Oh, you got a term for these kinds of challenges?”

“Yeah, that term is called shitty design. At least I tend to view them as proof the creator of the game ran out of good ideas and just decided to make something shitty to pad the time. I guess the creator of this dungeon wanted to spice things up and added a water level but ended up just making this dungeon go from a mushroom-filled hellhole to a soggy and wet mushroom-filled hellhole,” Jake said only half-jokingly. Not even half-jokingly... maybe quarter-jokingly.

Irin stared for a moment before regaining her composure and smiling. “I am sure the previous floor was well-thought-out. Knowing how to adapt to a new environment is an important trait that the dungeon creator wanted to teach us.”

“Sure. Doesn’t mean it didn’t suck,” Jake countered, getting a reluctant nod in return.

“I will need to go meditate for a while,” Reika added in with a sigh after their useless quipping about water levels. “Just wake me up once everyone is ready. I should be able to manage either way.”

“Same... for the meditation part, not the manage either way part,” Bastilla also said, a bit downtrodden.

Irin nodded. “I shall rest too. Please do not hesitate to wake me.”

Jake nodded at them before finally turning his attention to Draskil, who had taken a seat on the ground, just staring out into space. He had been very mute for a long while. In fact, he had barely spoken during the floor at all and only now seemed to relax, making Jake decide this was the time and place.

Putting up a quick barrier so only the two of them could hear, he asked the dragonkin:

“You okay, mate?”

The dragonkin looked at him instantly, his eyes filled with bloodlust. “What?”

Jake didn’t feel intimidated but just shook his head. “If you want to talk, just talk. If you don’t... then don’t. Just wanted to let you know that if you want to, we are both here, and I am at least decent at listening.”

Draskil didn’t say anything but just turned his gaze away and stared into the wall of the tent. About a minute passed before he spoke. UPDATE FROM [movel](#) ♦ [fire](#) ♦ [met](#)

“Water brings death,” he began as Jake soon learned an excellent reason for aquaphobia.

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Chapter 504: Heroes of the Ninth Floor

“Underground... water is not like up above,” Draskil began, speaking far more than usual. “We sought long and far for it. Digging. We needed water to live... but the water was also a bringer of death. The skilled ones tried to be careful, but they failed. Sometimes. If they made a mistake...”

Draskil stared into the air again as he sighed and spoke in a serious tone. “They fucked up. Made a hole into a large reservoir of groundwater, flooding everything. It spread through our caverns and into our homes. So many drowned... I was the only one left. Family dead. Alone. Stuck for days with the water rising... had to swim.”

Jake saw the now so powerful dragonkin shiver as he stopped talking. He had known that Draskil had been a mole-type creature before the system and what Villy had described as half-human-like. Something with intellect between that of a human and a chimpanzee. Smarter than any normal animal for sure and smart enough to form societies and have full sapience.

“Happened often... but we needed to dig. Water fine, but being in it is not,” Draskil finally shook his head as he stared down. A few more moments passed before he looked at Jake. “Fear makes me weak?”

“Being afraid of something and being weak has nothing to do with one another,” Jake said with a shrug. “What matters is what you do when afraid. You swam alongside us, you fought, you killed. Even if you were afraid, you didn’t show weakness. So no, that doesn’t make you weak, but quite the opposite.”

Draskil was clearly skeptical as he sneered. “I was weaker because of fear.”

Does he want me to scold him or what? Jake asked himself but still didn’t fully agree.

“We were all weaker. You have already shown that even in the face of fear, you don’t back down, and even if you are afraid of it now, you can overcome that fear,” Jake said, trying to be convincing. He hoped for Draskil to accept the answer and feel relieved, but it didn’t go that way.

“What do you fear?” Draskil instead just asked.

Jake opened his mouth and was about to answer but stopped. What was he afraid of? If he was thinking back... he felt a bit scared of Oras when he saw him in the void? No, that wasn’t really him being scared but more an instinctual fear. But there was...

His silence seemed to annoy Draskil as the dragonkin asked. “Don’t know?”

Jake took a moment longer before shaking his head. “I don’t. Not really.”

That was... a lie. Jake just didn’t want to say it as he realized he did have one fear. It was a weird thought, but Jake was legitimately scared of one thing – losing control. Not in the sense of momentarily being unable to do something or being forced into doing things, but truly losing control of himself. He remembered one time that had truly scared him.

It was the time he thought Miranda had tried to take over his Pylon. The anger and bloodlust he had felt at that moment. Those emotions that now felt so foreign. He had not been in control then but acted on pure impulse and emotion. Jake feared those kinds of emotions. And there was one other recent time where that happened.

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During his meeting with Ell’Hakan within the Seat of the Exalted Prima, Jake had lost his wits and trusted someone for no god damn reason. He had been furious afterward but knew deep down it was due to fear. He was afraid of that kind of power that could make Jake lose, even just momentarily, control of his own emotions... because he knew that even without any outside sources interfering, his own emotions were scary.

It was honestly a stupid fear. Fearing your own strong emotions. Or maybe it was a normal fear that many people had. Perhaps it wasn’t truly the emotions themselves he feared either, but what he would do while feeling those emotions.

“Or you do... and don’t want to share,” Draskil accurately read Jake. For some reason, this seemed to make the dragonkin feel better as he regained his old toothy smile. “All things to overcome.”

Jake wryly smiled as he nodded, not sure if his fear was something one could truly overcome. Especially not with his bloodline. Perhaps it was closer to something you just came to accept and live with. Something to manage.

The two of them didn’t speak much more but just relaxed and meditated a bit. Hours passed as they all got back into optimal condition, just needing a potion or two to top themselves up. The break was ultimately more to replenish mental energy than anything else and have them have a mental reset before the eighth floor.

Entering the eighth floor, it instantly became clear this was more of the same as those before the seventh, making Jake think that his theory of the water level being a failed attempt to diversify was correct. The only real difference on the eighth floor was how everything had just gotten massive in scale. Even the mushroom men had changed.

[Mushroom Man Giant Warrior - 183]

It towered more than fifteen meters into the air but otherwise looked the same. They all felt like they were miniatures of themselves. It was a pretty fun and novel experience.

Not that it had any effect on the outcome. Draskil still tore the big bastards apart with ease, and Jake blew them up with Arcane Powershots as he killed in droves together with the Malefic Dragonkin. Reika and Irin also joined in, but Bastilla could well and truly no longer participate meaningfully in combat. Reika barely could, but at least her ice magic helped slow down foes for Irin to sometimes finish them off. The problem was that Irin didn’t really have many offensive skills or abilities.

Her race offered her skills mainly related to subterfuge and illusion magic, as well as other things one would expect of a succubus. Skills that were obviously not useable inside the dungeon unless Irin wanted to get really freaky with a giant mushroom. And that was a mental image Jake really didn’t need.

Making their way through the cavern, they soon reached the next gate and saw the challenge to pass the eighth floor. Once they read it, Jake nearly wanted to laugh.

Create a hemotoxin, necrotic poison, or neurotoxin of at least uncommon rarity from the materials found on this floor and place it in the cauldron. In order to open the lid of the cauldron, at least eight hundred mushroom men must be slain.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 78/800. Poison placed in the cauldron: 0/1

“Quite a spike in difficulty,” Irin said after reading it. And she was technically correct. While the seventh floor had also required them to make an uncommon rarity poison, the

materials provided had been far better as there were even a few rare rarity mushrooms they could use. On this floor, based on their initial observations, the best one could get was of uncommon rarity, and mushrooms with any of the required properties would take a good while to find.

However...

“Well, this will be easy,” Jake smirked as he pulled out two types of mushrooms he had already picked up earlier. “I will need more of these two mushrooms. Also, I need some of that red stalk you picked up earlier, Reika, and get the cores of those big stabby-arm mushroom men.”

They all looked at him a bit as Jake just shrugged. “What? Not my fault the dungeon decided to suddenly get easy. I wanted to gather all this stuff to eat anyway, as I am always looking to improve my hemotoxins and necrotic poison.”

Draskil nodded in approval showing himself a true man of culture. “Good poisons.”

With those words left to collect what Jake had asked for and Reika handed him the stalks before going to find more. Jake ate some of the materials he had gathered to absorb some knowledge through Palate as he got to work while the rest of his group killed things. Occasionally they would return with materials as Jake slowly refined the process. He made a common rarity hemotoxin in the very first concoction, and less than four and a half hours after entering the eighth floor, he got it.

Jake grinned as Draskil returned with some more materials, only to see Jake toss the poison bottle towards the cauldron. It landed on the lid still on top with a clank as Jake shook his head in an overly dramatic way.

“Man, you guys are sooo slow,” Jake failed to hold himself back from saying. He looked at the cauldron as he felt very good about himself.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 771/800. Poison placed in the cauldron: 0/1

“Only because we bring you stuff,” Draskil scoffed.

“What’s that? Us doing our assigned jobs with me excelling?” Jake kept laughing as he got up. Draskil looked slightly annoyed but didn’t complain more. In fact, he looked happy even with all his grumbling as the floor had gone far faster than expected.

Jake joined the dragonkin as they headed out and got killing. There were around a thousand giant mushroom men on the floor total, and they ended up slaying most while collecting materials. Even if they could have been out of the floor within less than five hours, they ended up staying for ten or so more simply to take full advantage of the place. Each floor held mushrooms Jake had never seen or heard of before, just as the

dungeon had been described, and it would be foolish not to eat as many as they could for Palate.

Bastilla and Irin were the only ones really working for the last around seven hours as Irin was making their food and even mixed some salads using the mushrooms. Bastilla frankly had too many corpses to dismantle and ended up only bothering with those who had Lifecores within. If they had to wait for her to dismantle nearly a thousand corpses – well, realistically, nine hundred as Draskil had taken his frustrations from the water level out on a few – they would have been there for well over a day. Probably longer. This time also allowed Draskil to get back in top condition as he had expended quite a bit of energy. There had been a lot of them, after all.

“One floor left,” Irin smiled after they had ended their break and now stood before the passageway to the ninth floor.

“And that C-grade optional boss floor,” Jake added on.

“Technically, every floor after the fourth is optional,” Reika correctly said.

“I feel like I should be paying to be here,” Bastilla said self-deprecatingly.

Draskil just grunted as they opened the gate and went through the passageway. Jake dearly hoped the designer hadn’t decided to make the ninth floor a water level and was relieved when he saw it was just more mushrooms without the water. It was a bit of a mix between the giant stuff on the eighth floor and all the prior mushroom floors with regular-sized foes. Regular-sized being the three-meter tall mushroom men.

One thing that was different was the sheer number of foes. Just standing at the entrance to the floor, Jake saw thousands of them. Some were Mushroom Man Healers, Mushroom Man Warriors, Mushroom Man Defenders, and Mushroom Man Mages. All kinds of mushroom men. And in the middle of them, standing on a large mushroom, was the boss of the ninth floor.

[Mushroom Man General – lvl 199]

With the General were naturally its commanders, which were just copy-pasted versions of the boss on the fourth floor with a few more levels on top. Four of them.

[Mushroom Man Commander – lvl 195]

“The level of enemy diversity in this dungeon is just utter shit-tier,” Jake said, stating facts. Recycling older bosses as semi-regular enemies. Really?

“I must admit, it does seem rather uninspired,” Reika agreed.

"I am sure there is a reason it is like this," Irin tried to defend the dungeon designer again even if she had to know, deep in her heart, that the dungeon designer had kind of sucked.

"Anyway, let's get to the gate on the other side and figure out what the objective is this time around," Jake said.

They all agreed and followed as they avoided the central part of the floor to not engage the boss. Not because they thought it was a threat, but because they wanted to avoid killing the boss only to figure out they needed to do something special to reach the next floor.

Only a few mushroom men were killed on the way to the cauldron placed in front of the gate. Another set of instructions was naturally also there, and this time there really was a spike in difficulty.

Create a poison using the Lifecore of the Mushroom Man General and from the materials found on this floor, and then place it in the cauldron. This poison must be at least of uncommon rarity and must primarily contain life affinity energy. In order to open the lid of the cauldron, at least two thousand mushroom men must be slain.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 41/2000. Poison placed in the cauldron: 0/1

"Only one real attempt... a complex affinity to have while still making it a poison..." Jake muttered as he read it.

"Uncommon rarity too," Reika added with some worry. "We will need to make the life affinity energy highly volatile, that is for sure. If not, it won't be recognized as a poison."

"The problem is that the general's core will likely lean far more towards a very stable and controlled life affinity considering its Records as a general," Jake pointed out. "We will also need some cores from healers, but that energy is obviously of the healing kind."

If Jake could add some of his own materials, it would be fine, but he couldn't. The only thing he seemed allowed to add was his blood, as it was semi-qualified as dungeon material due to parts of it stemming from the dungeon courtesy of eating a lot of mushrooms.

"Before we decide anything, we need to get a proper understanding of what we have available," Reika said, shaking her head.

"You can do it?" Draskil asked.

“Well, I think so, yeah, but I need to have the core of the general first,” Jake said. “Also, the core of the commanders are likely just lesser versions of the general, so we can use them for practice crafts.”

“So the first objective is to collect what this floor has available to get a scope of what we need?” Irin asked clarifyingly.

“And eat a mountain of mushrooms to figure out which ones are best,” Jake sighed.

“We go?” Draskil asked.

Jake summoned his wings and looked at Reika and Irin. “You two take the perimeter and hunt the stragglers?”

The two of them nodded as Bastilla added: “Then I will stand and cheerlead uselessly on the side, waiting for them to kill stuff I can dismantle.”

He gave her a pity thumbs-up as he and Draskil got to work. Jake and the dragonkin took to the air and flew towards the army of mushroom men. Every floor had grown in size as they progressed, and this one was no different. The large Mushroom Man General sat upon its mushroom uncaringly and unaware of the two monsters on their way to slaughter it.

Nay. Not monsters. Monsters did not act to set the world right by killing abominable existences that should have never existed. These were truly evil beings that deserved only death to make up for the sin of being alive. There was another name for those like Jake and Draskil who selflessly became arbiters of justice:

Heroes.

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

Chapter 505: Mushroom Massacre & Friend Visit

It was war. On one side was a general with his four commanders and an army of soldiers willing to fight and die for their leaders. An organized group that worked together and used synergy to become more than what they were individually. There were thousands of them, every single one towards the end of D-grade.

On the other side were two people. A hunter with a bow and a dragonkin who seemed to finally have found an opportunity to let loose. These two were naturally the heroes of this fight. The brave men who would stand against the evil mushrooms.

It was also a display of something else... the disparity of power even in the same grade and level bracket. Jake was at a lower level than most of his opponents, and Draskil was still lower than a few of them. One would think their numbers would matter, that their synergy would allow them to fight. It didn't.

Maybe if they had actual tactics and not just sometimes tried to take hits for one another, it would matter. Maybe if they had ritual magic or complex formations. Had healers working together to form large barriers. However, as it was, they had none of these things, which made what transpired next only describable by one word:

Massacre.

Two words?

Justified massacre.

Explosions of arcane power lit up the cavern as Jake bombarded his opponents.

A dense mist of poison hung thick in the air as Draskil and Jake both pumped it out of their wings. Jake killed primarily using explosive arrows that tore mushroom men apart with ease and followed up with occasional kill shots with stable arrows, while Draskil had a far simpler style.

He was more the rip and tear sort of fighter. His entire body was a weapon that none of their opponents could even scratch. His scales offered defenses to nearly all magic, his attacks unstoppable to the mushrooms as he tore their limbs off and ripped up their flesh, leaving rotting wounds behind.

Draskil also showed fighting methods Jake could never even attempt. His tail was like a fifth limb that whipped around and sometimes even impaled his foes. If not, he used it for movement, yanking himself back or using it to push himself, or while he was mid-air as a counterweight to allow him to rapidly reposition.

The dragonkin did not show any magic besides some to strengthen himself. Jake did notice how he also had the Pride skill like Jake, but his version was clearly far more focused on the mental attack aspect and making a domain of intimidation without any of the mana-control amplifying aspects.

Jake was actually pretty certain Draskil had all the of the Malefic Viper skills. He had believed it for a good while, but after the dungeon, it was more obvious. He clearly had Palate based on all he ate and Sagacity to properly store the knowledge. Jake did think Sagacity was still at a relatively low rarity, and Draskil did say that he had some bad

skills he was working on. Besides that, he clearly had the wings, claws, and scales skills. These were likely unavoidable racial skills for any Malefic Dragonkin.

Sense of the Malefic Viper was also obvious based on how well he found mushrooms. That just left Blood and Touch. Jake was most unsure about Touch, honestly. Draskil also had Blood based on how he had used some of it as a weapon once, but Jake had yet to see the dragonkin use the familiar glow of Touch of the Malefic Viper. It was possible he had it and just never used it, but it was also possible he didn't have it or had changed it to a form very different from what Jake used. Like a purely non-combat version or something.

Now, Jake could just ask him, but where was the fun in that? He would rather just try and figure it out himself while slaughtering an army of mushroom men. The human and dragonkin had already killed hundreds before meeting up as Jake turned to Draskil.

"You want the big boss?" Jake asked. "Just remember we need all the Lifecores intact."

Draskil grunted in confirmation before asking: "We need the small ones?"

Jake shrugged. "Some, but not all."

Draskil then grinned. "You wanna see my breath?"

"I guess?" Jake asked. He wasn't sure what Draskil meant initially but soon understood.

The dragonkin took a breath, and for a moment, Jake felt all the mana in the environment stop before getting dragged in like Draskil's mouth was a vacuum. Intense mana gathered at a level far above Jake had ever seen anything in D-grade do.

Then he released it. A green beam was emitted from his mouth that swept across the cavern below. It was only a few meters in diameter when it hit the ground and made a grand sweep from one end of the cavern to the other. Not a single mark was left on the ground where it hit... but everything between the dragonkin and the ground was gone.

A line had been made through the entire dungeon. For a few dozen kilometers, a rotting black line that emanated death and decay had been formed as everything the breath had touched had decayed to nothingness in an instant. It did not matter if it was a plant or mushroom men over level 180. They had all just ceased to be. ~~nope!-fire-net~~

Jake stared a bit at the sight that was both impressive and unimpressive at the same time. It was not an impressive-looking attack. There was no grand explosion, no massive scar left by the breath... just an eerie nothingness. It had simply killed everything it hit, and even more scary was how Jake did not feel a single whisp of mana from where it had hit. It was just... desolation. Jake didn't know for sure, but he had a feeling no mushroom would grow on that black line for a very long time.

All in all, the breath had killed only about ninety mushroom men that had been hit. Mind you, it didn't matter where they were hit. As long as a single part of their body had touched the breath, their entire bodies had turned to black sludge in an instant.

One thing was also clear... if Draskil ever used that attack on Jake, he would have to dodge it using his precognition. The beam moved faster than any attack Jake could make, and if he didn't move before it was released, he would have no way to get out of the way. And if he didn't dodge in time? Well, then Jake was just happy he still had Moment of because that would sure as hell activate.

"Impressive?" Draskil asked with a satisfied grin.

"Definitely wouldn't wanna be hit by it," Jake agreed. "Ah, but don't use it on essential foes... it didn't leave even a single Lifecore behind. Or anything, really."

"Bah," Draskil jokingly dismissed his words. "I kill the general. No breath."

Jake motioned for him to go ahead as he instead targeted the commanders. He saw that Reika and Irin were doing fine on their own, too, killing a few here and there themselves. Compared to Jake and Draskil, they barely made a dent, but they were never meant to anyway. This dungeon was made for members of the Order, not just those who were supremely talented. Jake and Draskil were way above the expected power level of anyone expected to do the dungeon, even on the ninth floor, and only the C-grade could potentially offer them a good fight. Shit, this was a dungeon where the alchemy portion was the real challenge, so maybe it was silly for them to expect a good fight to begin with.

But before alchemy, it was always good to get some killing done. Always got Jake in the mood to do some concocting, ya know?

Meira was incredibly nervous as she waited. Master had given her permission, that was true, but she still felt unsure about actually doing it. In the end, she agreed to it after she and her friends had completed a lesson together and began working on an assignment where some of her Master's books could be useful.

The Grand Elder had also made it clear he didn't care if she invited people over and had told her that he would just not be there if she did. Meira was still perplexed why someone like the Grand Elder even bothered spending time on her, and it made her even more confused when she considered that her Master had clearly been the one to make him accept such an arrangement.

She just tried to not think about it too much and instead did her best in everything. Her Master clearly had plans, and Meira would do her best to follow his will and try and make them a success. If inviting her friends over was something he had explicitly given her permission to do, and if even the Grand Elder had voiced his lack of concern about doing this, perhaps it was just their way of telling Meira to do it? She wasn't good at

subtle hints and trying to interpret commands, but maybe it was possible he didn't just allow her to bring people but wanted her to?

That is why when she was asked to bring some books, she then spoke up and said she had been allowed to bring them to the library. Meira felt proud of herself for that and was happy that the three of them had agreed to come. The only one a bit reluctant was Izil, but Nella and Utmal had both agreed that it was about time she invited them over. Maybe it was? Meira didn't know... she had never invited friends over for anything before.

Or had friends at all, really.

About five minutes later, a gate opened, and out stepped Izil. The elf instantly saw Meira and smiled.

"Thank you for the invitation," she said courteously as she took out a small basket with flowers in it. "A token of my appreciation to you and the Lord of the mansion. Native flowers of the Altmar empire, all with their roots intact for potential planting."

Meira was surprised at seeing the gift but quickly understood. It wasn't that odd to bring something for her Master, considering he was far above the four of them in status as a black token. Ah, Meira had told them her Master had a black token as he had allowed her to do so.

"Thank you," Meira bowed as she accepted it. "I am sure my Lord will appreciate it."

"Is he present?" Izil asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Sadly not. My Lord had other engagements," Meira answered. She would not have dared to invite them if her Master was there... she barely dared to when he was not.

Izil just nodded and followed Meira as they entered the mansion to place the basket of flowers. Just as they entered the house and she had stored the basket properly, Meira saw that the gate outside activated again, with Nella and Utmal stepping through.

Meira hurriedly ran outside to greet them and got a disapproving look from Nella as she approached. "I hope you treat your owner better than guests," she scoffed once Meira got close. "Or maybe you just consider it acceptable to not greet guests?"

"I apologize!" Meira said with a bow. She really didn't want to be a bad host, especially not if it would reflect badly on her Master.

"She was just inviting me inside," Izil said as she walked out of the mansion, glaring daggers at Nella. "And if you two had been here on the agreed-upon time, there would be no issue."

“Relax, I was just joking around,” Nella said dismissively, Meira now feeling even more awkward as she had apologized. She still wasn’t good at jokes or that sarcasm thing... or was it called irony? She really didn’t quite know the difference.

“Nice place your Master got,” Utmal then spoke, throwing Meira out of her thoughts. “You didn’t lie about him being a black token, it seems. Where is he?”

“He is busy elsewhere,” Meira once more explained apologetically.

“Oh? That is unfortunate,” Nella said with a smile. “I would have loved to meet him. Now, if he is not here, let’s just get going. Where is the library?”

“Right this way,” Meira said, motioning towards the large mansion. The three of them followed as Meira wanted to keep the mood good, but Izil and Nella had been less and less friendly recently, and Meira really hoped they could get along better.

As they walked through the mansion, Izil asked: “Are there no other servants or occupants?”

“There is-“ Meira began but quickly cut herself off. The Grand Elder had been staying there most of the time, but he wasn’t there now and wasn’t truly living there. Also, she shouldn’t share he was there at all. “There is currently only me here. My Lord doesn’t have any other servants or slaves residing within the Order of the Malefic Viper as far as I am aware.”

Meira saw Utmal and Nella both frown a bit as Izil just nodded. “I see.”

Then suddenly, Meira felt a mental probing from Izil. She was confused and accepted it as a telepathic connection was formed. *“Meira... I didn’t want to ask before but are you a slave of the owner of this mansion?”*

Now Meira was even more confused. “Yes?” she answered instantly, using the connection. Didn’t they already know that by now?

Izil frowned even more than before. *“If possible, can I meet the owner of your contract?”*

“I can maybe ask...” Meira answered, more than a little unsure. She didn’t want to bother her Master needlessly with matters that were clearly her own to deal with.

“That is all I can ask,” Izil responded as she smiled again and spoke out loud just as they entered the library. “What an incredible library. Could you point me towards the tomes you spoke of?”

Meira responded positively but was still not sure what Izil had actually wanted... but what she did know was that Utmal and Nella were both looking at her quite a bit differently than before. It should be fine, though. They were friends, right?

A great wrong had been set right. The abominable mushrooms were now dead, slain by the two heroes as their bounty had been harvested. Jake and Draskil had disengaged after a good period of fighting to collect materials from the areas they had cleared of mushroom men and then taken a small break.

By now, Jake was sitting at the exit of the ninth floor together with Reika, trying to figure out a solution. Both of them had their crafting equipment out, Jake using his cauldron and Reika having a far more advanced setup with several flasks, bottles, filters, and whatnot... still surrounding a cauldron, though.

It had been over two days since they entered the floor, and Jake and Reika had been busy as hell. Jake was eating and experimenting at all times with the different materials on the floor, but making the required poison wasn't as straightforward as one could hope.

Draskil was off hunting alone again with the alchemists working while Bastilla was dismantling corpses, having Irin protect her.

During this time, Jake decided to enter Serene Soul Meditation as he experimented to also check in on a certain someone.

"Could you do me a favor and spend less time sitting hunched over a cauldron and more time watching that dragonkin fight?" sim-Jake asked the moment Jake popped into his Soulspace.

"What?" Jake asked, confused as he oriented himself. He saw that sim-Jake had resealed the Eternal Hunger chimera using some kind of shadow barrier and had been standing impatiently waiting for Jake to enter.

"I just want you to reflect on what you gave up on," sim-Jake shrugged. "I would have one hundred percent chosen to become a Malefic Dragonkin. And no, giving up on alchemy would not be a loss."

"Oh, are you getting jealous you can't be a scaly boy? I thought you wanted to learn from his fighting style or something," Jake smirked.

"Heh," sim-Jake scoffed. "Not much to learn there. His style is simple and effective but far below what I am aiming for."

"But you are jealous of the claws," Jake still pointed out.

"Fuck yeah, you bet I am! Those things are insane," sim-Jake grinned. "Now I will excuse myself and allow you to do your alchemy... but just one quick question. If you want the life affinity energy to be more volatile, isn't it enough to just mix in a bit of our arcane affinity? Just the destructive aspect. If not the affinity, then at least the concept you know?"

Jake shook his head. "Thank you for pointing out your utter lack of knowledge when it comes to alchemy. Won't work. We need it volatile but still with a direction to cause harm using the life affinity energy. Life affinity does not deal damage by destroying... it is more like it grows stuff wrong."

Sim-Jake nodded. "Yeah, I have no idea what the fuck I am talking about. I am gonna play some more with the chimera. Now that thing is a good example of a bundle of energy turned very antagonistic and full of life even when getting smacked around!"

"See you arou-" Jake began as he got an idea. An idea he had not even considered before now, and it was an incredibly novel one.

Curses were all about emotions... powerful emotions... so what if they could add some of that to the mix? Make a curse poison? One making use of an emotion Jake had plenty of:

Hatred for mushrooms.

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Chapter 506: United In Hatred

Jake didn't really know all that much about curses. But he did know a bit. He had the Root of Eternal Resentment in his Palate for a long-ass time, and it had housed a shitload of curse energy. Now, as for infusing that concept into a poison? Well, that was something entirely different.

He shared his idea with Reika and got a very skeptical response initially. She did point out some rather glaring issues. Curses tended to be born from strong emotions, yes, but they are also extremely hard to control as they were essentially emotions so strong they had tangible effects on the world. To contain a curse within a poison should not be easy, especially while avoiding it overpowering the life affinity aspect of the finished product. So that would be a bit of a challenge, but at least he was a bit better at another aspect of the task.

Jake had some experience with something that was kind of a life affinity poison. Well, one real experience - all the way back in the challenge dungeon where he had created his Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau. He now knew in retrospect that it was pretty much just a vitality-increasing elixir on crack and made unstable as fuck, but he also knew that this wasn't possible to do with the materials he currently had available. This chapter is updated by *novel*◇*fire*◇*net*

Firstly, the amalgamation had not been made from life affinity energy but more a vital affinity. They were closely related but not exactly the same, and changing it into a vitality-increasing energy type would likely result in it no longer counting as truly life-affinity.

Secondly, the only reason it had worked back then was due to Malefic Viper's Poison triggering and upgrading the poison to above what it would usually be. It had been a direct impartment of Records by the Viper himself and not something Jake could replicate even if he wanted to.

Jake thus spent a good while considering how to make it, and Reika also came with plenty of input. One thing quickly became clear: if he wanted to use his curse energy, they would have to find a way to infuse it without overpowering and dominating any other part of the concoction. Transmutation was quickly ruled out as its transformative effect likely wouldn't work well with the curse energy.

There was the possibility of infusing a catalyst but there tended to be rather stringent requirements before one could infuse an object with curse energy. One requirement tended to be time and connection to the curse. Infusing a mushroom with a curse related to hating mushrooms sounded like a good way to just make it implode. The same was true for doing it to a Lifecore.

Yet this did not deter Jake or Reika as they began working on another way: ritualism. And for this, Jake had a skill that he hadn't really used much but would no doubt prove useful.

[Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)] – As a master of your own path, the power of your Soulspace and authority of self is unquestionable. Grants knowledge of and allows the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist to perform rituals pertaining to the soul. Soul Rituals must be performed both within the Soulspace and the real world. As a forger of your own path, Records infused during any soul ritual will hold more weight. Effects of the ritual are based on the nature of the ritual performed as well as the materials used during the ritual. All rituals will scale with Willpower in addition to other stat bonuses applied according to the nature of the ritual performed.

While this skill primarily revolved around souls, it also gave some general knowledge about rituals. Curses were also deeply related to the soul anyway, as they were born from it. Most curses came into being when someone died, as it was the remnant emotions in one of the layers of the soul that managed to collect and take a form with intent. Most often, it was due to a lot of people dying with similar grievances and thus empowering each other. However, the part of the soul that would turn into a curse upon death could also be focused on and extracted to forcefully make a curse. An oversimplification, sure, but this was effectively it.

This is what Casper did. He focused, extracted, and infused his own emotions into vessels that he then used as weapons. That he could also mix it with mana was the kind of technique that Jake was still very unsure of how he did. Anyway, none of this was that important as Jake didn't plan on making a truly cursed item but just a poison with a bit of curse energy mixed in to give it direction.

It didn't take him long to figure out how he wanted to infuse the energy. He was limited to materials from the dungeon, but as he discovered earlier, he could also use his blood. He could naturally also use his own mana and energy as that was just a part of the crafting process, and one could argue Jake was technically part of the dungeon as he was within it, so his plan should work.

With enough focus and a ritual to further amplify the effects, Jake believed he could make his blood into essentially a cursed liquid that would mix with an otherwise non-damaging life affinity item. Life affinity was by itself not damaging unless made volatile or, as Jake hoped to do, self-destructive.

Because yes... when Jake considered earlier how infusing a curse would just make the life affinity item self-implode, Jake saw that as an opportunity.

What he wanted to do was to make the life affinity latch onto the vital energy of the mushroom man, making it self-implode in self-hatred upon entering the body out of pure disgust, turning it into poison. Would this work? Maybe. Was Jake going to try, hoping to see a mushroom man consume itself and effectively commit suicide? Fuck yeah, he did.

Reika was supportive of his idea, and the two of them began experimenting in this direction. He had decided to begin by just making a highly dense life-affinity liquid using the mushroom juices of slain foes and further infusing that with Lifecores. He also had to remind himself that the final concoction would require the Lifecore of the General, which actually worked out perfectly with his plans. He wanted it to be a controlled self-implosion, after all.

It was one of the most ambitious things Jake had ever done, but he felt confident, and he really wanted to do it.

Hours passed as iteration after iteration was made. Soon they settled on a stable version of highly focused life energy in the form of a flask. Reika was the one who crafted it using her skills and managed to create several common rarity flasks for Jake to experiment with. She added that when it came to the real thing, she should be able to make an uncommon flask using the best materials they had.

Jake, on the other hand, focused entirely on the poison aspect of the creation. He planned on making a ritual where he would infuse his own blood into the Lifecore using a ritual. However, as he attempted to do this several times, he repeatedly failed to actually create a curse. He didn't understand why as he kept trying until a realization struck him. One he never thought possible.

My hatred isn't strong enough...

How it was even possible, Jake didn't know. He did hate mushrooms; of that, there was no doubt. But... he had to admit his hatred was not as strong as the level he had seen from others. It wasn't like mushrooms had killed his family, cut off his Path, or removed his freedom. They had just made Jake mad and annoyed, and there was that one time where it tied him to a toilet for far too long.

Casper had an extreme natural affinity to curses and initially channeled his anger toward those who killed his now-ghost-girlfriend Lyra. That was some real anger, and Jake knew that while Casper was a very introverted person, he was also the sort of person go to all in when he felt something.

Jake could not claim his hatred of mushrooms was at that level. Feeling a bit distressed at the thought of failing, Jake remembered: he was not alone in his hatred.

"I need Draskil," Jake spoke. "I need his hate."

Reika raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't it be best if we all joined in and contributed to the ritual?"

"On a scale of one to ten, how much do you hate mushrooms?" Jake asked.

"Well, I guess it depends on the type of—"

"Already disqualified by not instantly saying eleven," Jake shot her down.

"Now you are just being unreasonable," Reika argued with a sigh. "It is utterly illogical to hold such a level of hatred towards fungi."

"Hate is illogical by nature. And it is in my nature to hate mushrooms. Always has been. From the time I was a kid, and my mom tried to make me eat those shitty white button mushrooms or whatever the fuck they are called, I have despised them. They bring nothing good to the world, and their only use is when they are destroyed and their juices are squeezed out to kill things. Because even in death, mushrooms bring only suffering," Jake said, getting a bit flared up and feeling like he was a step closer already to successfully creating the curse.

"Okay..." Reika said, shaking her head as she went off to contact Draskil as Jake made modifications to the ritual. He needed to bring Draskil into the fold and not just make his hate part of the curse. Curses were naturally inclined to combine similar negative emotions, so it wasn't a difficult adaptation.

A few minutes later, Draskil appeared together with Reika. Jake looked at him and asked.

“On a scale of one to ten, how much do you hate mushrooms?”

“Not worth giving number, not deserving of the thought energy to consider,” Draskil sneered.

Jake looked at Reika, who reluctantly resigned herself and went back to making a flask good enough to use in the final concoction, or at least in one of their four available test concoctions using the Lifecores of Mushroom Man Commanders.

“Draskil, our plan is to-“

“I don’t care,” Draskil cut him off.

“Fair. I need you to pour all your hate into your Blood of the Malefic Viper, put it in my cauldron, and then join me in my hatred of mushrooms for the ritual,” Jake shortened his speech down to only what the dragonkin needed to do.

“Make curse?” Draskil asked, clearly a little interested even if he said he wasn’t. Jake understood. It was about hating mushrooms, after all.

“Yep,” Jake nodded.

Draskil nodded, fully understanding without needing any more explanation. Jake began the ritual without further ado as Draskil and Jake mixed their blood together with the Lifecore of a dead Mushroom Man – and by now, Jake was beginning to realize that he was pretty much doing a blood ritual with what was effectively the heart of a monster.

It was a bit morbid... but nothing was off the table when it came to slaying mushrooms.

Jake instantly felt the difference as he realized that Draskil’s hatred for mushrooms seemed to rival or even surpass his own. That, and Jake also ran into the issue of Draskil’s blood being far more potent than Jake’s. And it wasn’t just due to the level disparity, but clearly, Draskil had Blood of the Malefic Viper at a higher rarity than himself.

It was a challenge to overcome, but one Jake gladly took on. Draskil was incredibly patient, far more than Jake would have expected, and assisted Jake with rituals throughout the next two days as he improved more and more. At the end of the second day, since he began making rituals together with Draskil, he made a Lifecore.

[Cursed Mushroom Man Mage Lifecore (Common)] – The cursed core of a Mushroom Man Mage. This Lifecore contains a large amount of life affinity energy that has now been contaminated with a curse of immense hatred towards its own kind. The core is slowly degrading due to its inherent nature caused by the curse making it seek to consume and destroy itself.

It wasn't much, but it was honest work. Sure, it would self-detonate within an hour or two, as far as Jake could tell, but it was good enough. They didn't even need the finished concoction to last very long, just long enough to pass the floor.

Draskil also seemed pretty happy at the finished creation and decided to stay and help. During the last two days, he did go off once in a while to hunt some more mushroom men, but he always returned quickly and got really engrossed in the process.

Only about a day and a half later, Jake got frisky and tried to use one of the Commander Lifecores. The first attempt failed, but feeling that he was close, he tried again, only to succeed the second time around,

[Cursed Mushroom Man Commander Lifecore (Uncommon)] – The cursed core of a Mushroom Man Commander. This Lifecore contains an immense amount of life affinity energy that has now been contaminated with a curse of immense hatred towards its own kind. The core is slowly degrading due to its inherent nature caused by the curse making it seek to consume and destroy itself.

With that, he and Reika began the final part of the process – fusing the Lifecore and flask. One would think this would be hard, but it was actually incredibly straightforward. Jake just had to place the Lifecore in the liquid of the flask and slowly diffuse it into the concoction while controlling the process.

He did also have to keep infusing some of the curse energy during the entire thing, needing Draskil present at all times. About a day after the first Commander Lifecore was made, they also made their first uncommon rarity concoction using it. If this had been the General's, it would have been enough then and there... but Jake was pushing for more.

Refining the process more and more, it finally culminated nearly a full day later. Using a large ritual and with Reika and Draskil both assisting in the process, they gave birth to liquid justice.

[Desired Fate of the Mushroom Men (Rare)] – On the border between a flask and a poison cursed by intense hatred, a bane of the mushroom men has been created as this very liquid desires nothing but their demise. Contains an intense amount of life affinity energy that will act to help those who seek to slay mushroom men. If consumed while actively killing mushroom men, this concoction will temporarily increase health regeneration as the life affinity helps you on your quest. If injected or consumed by any mushroom man, the effect will be the opposite, turning natural regeneration into active degeneration and flooding the body with intense amounts of hostile life energy as long as the will of the curse remains or the concoction runs out of energy. The concoction is currently stable but, with time, may slowly begin degrading due to its inherent nature caused by the curse making it seek to consume and destroy itself.

With great satisfaction, he looked at Draskil and Reika. Reika just seemed relieved and Draskil happy upon seeing the completed product. Inspecting the item itself, Jake was more than satisfied. He was happy to see it was even somewhat stable, even if it did carry a warning that it was temporary.

Was this kind of poison actually useful in practice, one might ask? No... no, not really. It had taken far too much effort to create, it was unstable, and Jake could quickly see that one would have to infect the foe with pretty much a full bottle's worth to get a proper effect, contrary to normal poisons where just a little would be highly effective. This was more the kind of poison you had to fool a mushroom man into drinking, which Jake had a hard time seeing.

This didn't make Jake any less satisfied with what they had made, though. It was objective proof of his and Draskil's hatred of mushrooms and a rare rarity item.

Now for the moment of truth. Would the concoction they had made qualify as poison and allow them to pass the floor?

With much anticipation, Jake placed the concoction in the cauldron in front of the final gate as he stared intently at the progress bar on the wall beside it.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 2000/2000. Poison placed in the cauldron: 1/1

After the obligatory round of high-fives and waves of relief, their entire group took a well-deserved rest.

Well, besides Bastilla, who kept dismantling, and Irin, who kept making food for Draskil and Jake. But before eating, Jake decided it was high time to get a bit of meditation done and check something he had neglected over the last few days: his notifications.

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Chapter 507: Reflecting On Stats & Supreme Final Boss

Jake sat down and relaxed while recuperating before moving on to the final optional boss. He felt pretty damn good about himself and, while he was sitting there, reflected on the progress he had made recently. Level-wise, he had gained one level in his profession during the period of nearly a month before they entered the dungeon, but after entering, Jake had now already gained four whole levels... which was actually an insane speed.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 171 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 174 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

What made it all even more insane was that Jake had not only been doing alchemy but also fighting. Though, to be fair, the fighting hadn't been difficult. Even so, it had netted him two levels.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 170 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 171 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

The combination of easy fights and the monotonous type of enemies made every foe barely give any experience, but he had killed enough to still get some levels. It did help that usually Jake had to actually go looking and find enemies, while in the dungeon, there were ten mushroom men around every corner. Follow current NOVELS on *novel* ♦ *fire* ♦ *net*

With these levels also came a few race levels.

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 170 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 171 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 172 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

Now... finally, with levels came Free Points. Jake wanted to just throw it all in Perception, he really did, but a voice at the back of his head that totally wasn't sim-Jake screaming within his Soulspace made him reconsider.

With great reluctance, Jake did something that disgusted him as he invested 280 Free Points into Strength. Instantly he felt a hot glow go through his body as his muscles seemed to almost bulge for a moment before settling down. He had exited meditation at this point and sat here opening and closing his fist.

It was more than a 10% increase to his total Strength just by investing those points. It was an actual tangible difference, but Jake also knew that a 10% increase in Strength

did not mean he now hit ten percent harder. The system and reality just didn't work like that, and the only time where Strength was the only real factor was when in a tug of war or when trying to push someone.

Not that it wasn't massively helpful to him, especially his melee skills. Sim-Jake had made it clear Jake needed more Strength, but also that Agility was still by far the most important stat. Something like a 60-40 split was best, according to him. Jake chose to trust his other self in that department.

Looking over his stats as a whole, they were relatively balanced, and he was beginning to get close to the optimal Strength-Agility split.

Stats

Strength: 4146

Agility: 6761

Endurance: 3626

Vitality: 4828

Toughness: 3521

Wisdom: 6207

Intelligence: 5067

Perception: 10720

Willpower: 5252

Free points: 0

Toughness and Endurance were both really falling behind, but Jake wasn't that worried as both stats were still considered high for his level.

The highest amount of stat points one could possibly gain per D-grade level – counting race, profession, and class- was around 250 total. 100 from class, seventy from race, and eighty from profession. This was all, of course, only in the case of a human. In reality, it would always be lower, and even in the top tier, one was considered close to the apex at 220 stats per D-grade level.

Below D-grade, it was a third for E-grade, so around 75 stats total per level was the top, and then it was even lower at F-grade below that. All in all, if someone gained around 60 per level in the first 100 levels – or 6000 total stats at the point of evolution to D-

grade – it would already be considered close to the theoretical maximum for pure stat gains while leveling.

Jake had over ten thousand total stats the day he evolved to D-grade – even without counting his equipment.

In reality, it wasn't as simple as just a pure equation due to all the other factors like titles, equipment, and elixirs, especially not counting percentage bonuses which Jake had plenty of. The "of the Malefic Viper" skills also added on extra stats, making it even more skewed.

Even then. If one stayed with the simplified math, then someone powerful at Jake's level, 172, would end up with 6000 stats for the first 100 levels and 220 for the next 73, for a total of 22,000 stats. Dividing that out in nine parts, then around 2500 in a single stat would be considered average. With Jake having a thousand more than that in even his lowest stat, it honestly wasn't bad, especially considering this example was of someone with a powerful Path. Again, oversimplified, but it was still clear Jake was far above the expected durability of the average D-tier at his level, despite never investing much into Toughness.

Ah, on a final note, Jake also just realized that he had surpassed 50,000 total stat points counting everything. Having a nearly 60% overall stat increase amplifier really was nice. To summarize, then Jake was just good in pretty much all aspects, and in Perception, he was in the realm of being a little bonkers with how much he had.

Abandoning any more thoughts about annoying math that Jake honestly couldn't be bothered with, he returned to meditation. The dungeon group meditated and recuperated for the better part of a day before it was time to take on the final challenge.

"We passed this a bit faster than expected," Irin said. "I expected us to take at least a little longer, and our speed is especially impressive considering the potentially needless over-complication of the ninth level."

"Hey, we passed it, and it allowed us to bond over shared hatred," Jake grinned at Draskil.

"I must also admit it was a very interesting method. I would never have come up with using a curse. Instead, I think I would have mixed some of the death affinity mushrooms into the concoction along with the life affinity energy and then just had it be stabilized and dormant using the Lifecore. Using a catalyst or just having the balance between the energies be very reactive, we could then do so it was activated upon entering another living foe, making the life and death affinity clash. It should have counted as a rather effective poison," Reika added on. "But I guess there are some pitfalls I missed since Jake rejected the idea."

“Nah, it would have totally worked. I just really wanted to go with my idea,” Jake waved it off. “With my method, Draskil also got involved!”

Reika stared at Jake for a moment before just shaking her head in slight disbelief. “Honestly? I think I learned more from your method too, so screw it.”

Draskil and Bastilla just stood silently in the background and didn’t seem to have anything to add, even if Jake could see Draskil had enjoyed Jake’s method. After Jake’s and Reika’s brief talk, Irin took the lead again.

“Anyway, time to tackle the final floor. Now, let me warn you, this is a fully-fledged C-grade we are dealing with,” she said as she put a hand on the gate. A notification appeared before all of them once more.

You have successfully passed the ninth floor and gone above and beyond expectations!

Now only one more challenge remains. A single more floor is sealed away at the bottom of the dungeon, only available to those who have proven themselves exceptional. But be warned, for the final floor houses an entity far more deadly than anything you have faced so far.

Do you wish to explore the final floor of the Indigo Caverns?

“I... should probably just leave,” Bastilla finally said. “I will just get in the way, and from what you said earlier, the final floor is pretty much just a single fight. Not much I can help with there, and I am unsure if I can even use my dismantling skills on a C-grade.”

“I concur in that I doubt I would be of much use,” Reika shook her head. “I couldn’t do anything to the General before, and a C-grade is bound to be a lot more powerful. I think it better I sit this one out.”

Irin also ended up nodding. “While I am confident I can stay hidden if the foe is distracted, I must admit I also don’t see myself making any meaningful contributions. I am not a fighter, as you have probably noticed.”

Jake exchanged a look with Draskil before he smiled lightly. “Well... I wouldn’t mind either way. If you want to come along to watch and maybe get some better rewards, I am all for it.”

Draskil grunted in approval. While he wasn’t the most talkative, Jake had a feeling he could actually be a bit of a softie and genuinely had taken a liking to their three other party members.

“I can try to hide us using illusions,” Irin wondered out loud, not even trying to be subtle that she wanted to enter the final floor with them. Reika also clearly wanted to go, and Bastilla fell to the peer pressure as she made a huge animated sigh.

“Fiiiine! Let’s go and possibly die due because the two of them forget we exist and accidentally blow us up or something without even noticing,” Bastilla moaned in resignation.

“Wouldn’t happen. My Perception is too high to not notice,” Jake rightly defended himself.

“I am not even going to argue that,” Bastilla signed again. “Let’s just go, alright? I already feel like I am some young mistress getting escorted through this dungeon, so I may as well stay shameless and finish it.”

With that, they all agreed to continue the dungeon and began going through the passageway. It was a bit longer than before, and while Bastilla did throw a second glance at the exit in the middle of the passage as they passed it, she stayed with the group.

Exiting the passageway, they came to yet another large floor... but this one was also very different from any prior. A blue hue dominated the entire place, and while it was filled with mushrooms, they weren’t the usual diverse kind. There were only glowing blue mushrooms spread throughout, and in the middle of the floor was an absolutely massive mushroom towering more than a kilometer into the air.

It gave off an intense sheen, and the cap was clearly illuminated as Jake saw something that looked like a throne on top of it. A small throne that barely registered as a small bulge on the mushroom cap. It looked like a throne for a child, which made sense when Jake saw what was sitting on it. It was a small mushroom man with a cap vaguely shaped like a crown.

You gotta be fucking kidding me.

[Mushroom Man King – lvl ???]

Defeat the supreme leader of the mushroom men: the Mushroom Man King.

Jake just stared in disbelief at the “final boss.”

It was just a small mushroom man no more than a meter tall, holding a wooden scepter with a glowing mushroom growing out the tip. On a scale from one to ten, it was a solid zero when it came to representation and intimidation.

“I...” Irin muttered as she stood there. “An unexpected opponent for sure, and-“

“Irin,” Jake interrupted her. “Just admit it already.”

She looked reluctant but finally sighed. “Okay... okay, I admit, the design of this dungeon *could* be better, and maybe some questionable decisions were made during its creation.”

“It’s shit,” Draskil just muttered.

Reika and Bastilla also didn’t hide their contempt. Jake decided to take charge and spoke: “Nevertheless, it is still a C-grade. With that in mind, we must go all out from the very beginning and utterly destroy this abomination. So stay back.”

Draskil understood as he moved forward. Jake joined him as he pulled out his bow and instantly began making an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter in his quiver. Irin and the others stayed at the gate many kilometers away from the throne of the Mushroom Man King as she set up a barrier making them invisible and hiding their presence.

“It is a mage of some kind,” Jake quickly said as he felt the mana from the Mushroom Man in the distance. “And this entire place is that little bastard’s domain.”

“Hm,” Draskil grunted. “Not strong.”

“No,” Jake shook his head. “No, it is not.”

Draskil grinned as his wings unfolded and his body began burning with power. Jake responded in kind as Arcane Awakening activated, and they both took flight towards the Mushroom Man King, who only now became aware of their existence.

The entire cavern began humming with mana as the little mushroom got off his throne and lifted the scepter. Every single mushroom present seemed to resonate with the scepter, and even the large mushroom beneath the little king responded.

Bolts of mana condensed by the thousands as the king attacked. Scales covered Jake’s body as Draskil just flew unbothered towards the boss. Beneath the king, the flesh of the mushroom cap began changing and seemed to almost liquefy and come alive as it moved to defend.

Jake had already stopped in mid-air and nocked an arrow to shoot. He avoided a few mana bolts before releasing it towards the Mushroom Man King but found his attack blocked by the tendrils of mushroom. However, even if he was blocked, he did his job as he made an opening.

With the tendrils out of the way, Draskil disappeared as he reappeared right in front of the Mushroom Man King. He swept his claw upwards and sent the little creature flying through the air with a few new claw marks on its shroomy body. Yet Draskil still frowned as the mushroom king healed before he even hit the cavern wall.

Jake did notice a very slight dimming of some of the mushrooms on the ground far below, as he understood. He should have known it was another case of kind of shitty design. Every time they dealt damage to the Mushroom Man King, it would absorb energy from the many mushrooms spread throughout the cavern to recover, making it effectively one tanky motherfucker.

“Gotta destroy the mushroom!” Jake yelled to Draskil, getting a roar of recognition in response. He didn’t really do as Jake expected but just charged the Mushroom Man King again, smashing it down towards the ground.

The little abomination was ready after the second strike and summoned blue barriers to defend himself, but Draskil just tore straight through them and grabbed the Mushroom Man King. He proceeded to tear the final boss in two and threw the pieces away.

Only for both of them to regrow a little crowned mushroom man holding a scepter.

Fuck me do I hate this place, Jake cursed. He proceeded to bombard the area with explosive arcane arrows but found the effect underwhelming. As he thought about others ways to fight, he got an idea as he reached into his inventory and took out three bottles.

On the ninth floor, the batch of poison had been put into four bottles total. One for the cauldron to pass the level and three that Jake had kept. Looking at them, Jake decided to see how good they actually were as he wrapped all three in arcane bolts and sent them into the massive blue mushroom before proceeding to explode the bolts and spreading the poison.

Instantly the poison took hold, and Jake saw parts of the mushroom begin to wither and die. The Mushroom Man King – both of them – lifted their small scepters, and instantly the mushroom began to regenerate and the poison rapidly eliminated.

Draskil turned towards him and threw him a glance as they both knew what had to be done. Jake acknowledged as Draskil went for the two Mushroom Man Kings as Jake beelined it towards the large blue mushroom. During the dungeon, Jake had used most of his alchemy skills, but one skill he hadn’t used yet was absolutely perfect for this situation:

Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 508: A Rude Interruption

Everyone knew by now that mushrooms sucked. No, they didn't just suck; they went above sucking. Their level of suck was so high they were endless vacuums of suffering. One of the reasons mushrooms sucked so much was because of how they worked.

Jake had encountered it before and knew that fungi were sneaky fucks. They liked to hide in things and make it look like there totally was an entire cavern full of mushrooms when it was actually just one single god damn fungus. This final boss floor was the same as Jake quickly came to realize. He tracked his poison in the large mushroom as it spread throughout the entire system of the fungus - the curse energy was divided and conquered by what had to be millions of mushrooms.

This made the entire fungus have an absolutely massive body covering well over a dozen square kilometers. And all of this was somehow linked to the Mushroom Man King. No, this wasn't a case where the huge fungus was actually the body of the little guy, but far more likely one where the small Mushroom Man had stumbled upon an incredibly powerful natural treasure and then grown it to the huge fungus Jake and Draskil were now seeking to destroy.

Based on what Jake could see, it was possible to just repeatedly kill the Mushroom Man King until the massive fungus ran out of energy, but it was far faster to kill both at once. It would probably take Draskil in excess of two hours with the current speed he was expending the energy of the mushrooms, and Jake wasn't even sure if the dragonkin would last that long if he had his boosting skill active. This approach of destroying the fungus also fitted way better with the theme of the dungeon as it wasn't as much a fight against an individual as it was a task to poison an entire ecosystem.

Jake used One Step to get to the stem of the massive mushroom as he was surrounded by the blue glowing fucks. Spores were released from all of them, trying to poison Jake, but all it did was make him more aware of the nature of the fungus.

Kneeling down, Jake blew away some soil as he took hold of the massive root system beneath the ground. The largest roots were around the massive mushroom, and Jake would use that as his point of entrance.

Above him, explosions repeatedly sounded out as the Mushroom Man King tried to get Draskil away from him, but the dragonkin shrugged it all off as he continued his assault. One party released dozens of different spells every second while the other simply ripped and tore with his claws and tail, with Draskil dominating it handily, giving the Mushroom Man no opportunity to address Jake.

Jake had grasped hold of the massive mushroom and closed his eyes for a moment. Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, and with his high Perception, he quickly came to

understand the massive network of roots. The cursed concoction had nearly run out of power while Jake got in position, but some of it still remained. He decided to take advantage of this.

Poison was pumped in as Jake sought to strengthen the cursed poison. At the same time, he delivered some more common fungicide to deal massive damage to the entire root system. He didn't need to use any of the aspects of subtlety from the soul poison he used on the last big blue mushroom he killed but could just go all in.

A barrage of spells was then released down towards him, but Draskil moved to intercept as he teleported with a flap of his wings. Jake would have been fine either way, but his dragonkin buddy had clearly decided that the little king was not even getting a sliver of a chance.

Focusing on his task, Jake kept poisoning the monstrosity of a fungus. He believed he was doing a good job until suddenly he felt something... a push. Usually, when one used Touch of the Malefic Viper, it was an infusion. But to make an infusion, a connection had to be formed, and through this connection, the fungus now attacked.

Dense energy flooded through the fungus' roots and into Jake. He considered letting go but knew that the fungus was now awake and would rapidly destroy the poison he had used if he gave up now. Even more importantly, then Jake didn't want to lose out and give up when his dragonkin buddy was watching and doing a splendid job himself.

Gritting his teeth, Jake felt the energy invade his body and begin to ravage him from within. The fungus contained far more energy than Jake did... far, far more energy. It was like a massive battery of pure power, and Jake's only saving grace was that it couldn't discharge much of it rapidly. The closest comparison Jake had to the fungus was the curse energy in Eternal Hunger, but that was a pretty bad comparison considering the curse energy had not been actively antagonistic towards Jake and was also on an entirely different level in both quality and quantity. This fungus did contain a lot of energy, sure, but if what was within Eternal Hunger went rampant, Jake knew entire planets could be consumed by its hunger.

Jake and the mushroom continued their battle of push and pull as both tried to combat the energy they were injected with. Jake felt that the energy flooding him was surprisingly pure, not having any affinity. It was still trying to kill him, but he was now sure it was all controlled by the Mushroom Man King.

Draskil and Jake were fighting the same foe in the battle of attrition as Jake pushed in more and more energy. He allowed the mushroom to attack him in kind, believing in his body's ability to take it. Considering the lack of affinity in the mushroom, Jake also began to pump in some dark mana. The nature of dark mana was to consume other types of mana and propagate itself, and Jake happily helped it do that to consume more of the mushroom's energy storage. He controlled the poison through Touch and tried to attack the most essential parts of the massive fungus to kill it faster.

It was a game of cat and mouse. The fungus tried to eliminate the toxic energy Jake poured in, while Jake wanted to keep pumping. In the meanwhile, he also needed to keep avoiding getting what he had already put in eliminated. If the massive fungus could lock down what toxic energy he injecting, it would be able to instantly just flood it with mana and destroy it.

Hence Jake controlled it. He condensed the toxic energy as he focused. A vivid image of a giant network of paths appeared in his mind, and he instinctively knew it was a representation of the Soulshape of the fungus. It almost felt as if Jake was a small yellow circle with a mouth running around a maze being chased by ghosts as he slowly consumed more and more of his foe. The source of this content is *novel✕fire✕net*

Realizing the fight was not going its way, the Mushroom Man King began trying to change its tactic. It saw Jake as the primary threat, and the now four versions of the little king began waving their wands and making tendrils of shroom emerge to attack Jake.

Jake, still holding into the roots of the massive fungus, kept his eyes closed as he focused. The tendrils flying for him suddenly began withering and turned into black dust that promptly scattered. More came, but they all met the same fate as Jake smirked unknowingly.

Every time the fungus moved, its Soulshape shifted slightly to represent it. All Jake did was split off some energy towards these moving parts, essentially sending toxic payloads into the tendrils to instantly destroy them. With the lacking ability of the Mushroom Man King to properly focus on taking down Jake while fighting Draskil, it had a tough time combatting this.

Jake kept up his part of the battle as he manipulated the toxic energy within the fungus like never before. At the same time, he also managed to do something else he usually didn't: amplifying the existing toxin he had injected. Or, more accurately, thrown on top of the giant mushroom.

He felt like he had more control than ever before and felt like he was touching upon an opportunity. Rather than infusing toxins into the creature itself... what if he injected it directly into the toxin he had already placed there? Sure, it had to go through the fungus, but currently, it was more like Jake connected a facet of toxins to the fungus and just let it drain into the maze-like Soulshape of the fungus before finally taking control of it. What if he instead shot it directly towards the toxic energy already in there? So rather than connecting a facet, he shot a water beam straight towards his target.

Combined with Sense of the Malefic Vlper and mayb-

****You have slain [Mushroom Man King – lvl 201] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 172 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 173 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

Jake's train of thought was interrupted by the entire Soulshape suddenly withering and breaking. His mind took a second to process what had happened as he looked up and saw Draskil with his mouth still open and a large black line cutting the large mushroom in two along with a few black rotting parts of the many Mushroom Man Kings falling to the ground.

He still stared as the dragonkin teleported down. "It died," Draskil said, a bit disappointed.

Jake felt the crumbling roots of the fungus in his hands as he sighed.

"Fuck me... be right back."

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 3

With that, Jake flashed out of existence for a moment as he went on a journey to experience the Path of the Malefic Viper – or at least a little snippet of it.

"Alright, we are closing in on the den," a male elf wearing golden armor said as he lifted his hand, signaling those behind him to stop.

Four men and six women followed him closely, all wearing different equipment and wielding powerful weapons. Jake, who was observing this, instantly knew all of them were C-grade... mid-tier C-grade, he guessed.

Out of this group, many would perhaps put most of their attention on their elven leader, but Jake focused on someone else. A human-looking male with long black hair, wearing a relatively simple robe. He didn't appear particularly threatening, and from how he was in the back and his equipment, he was clearly a caster of some kind.

However, the reason why he stood out to Jake was his familiar eyes and aura. This was the weakest iteration he had ever seen of him, but it was clearly the Malefic Viper fully disguised as a human.

"Strolas, do you have the flasks ready?" the elven leader asked as he turned to the one who would one day be known as the Malefic Viper.

"Yes, sir," the Malefic Viper – going by Strolas – answered in a meek tone. "Just remember not to take too much damage, or the flasks may lose their effect."

“I trust you,” the elf said with a smile. With that, the Viper handed out flasks to everyone in his group. They headed closer to the den, and once they did so, another caster of the group cast some magic before nodding. “It’s in there.”

The elven leader nodded. “Let’s go.”

Everyone drank their flasks. A few were a bit hesitant, but Strolas consumed his own instantly, making everyone else follow suit. Jake barely noticed a glint in the eyes of the Viper as the hunt began.

A massive beast firing out intense lasers of pure light magic emerged from the den and attacked. Jake watched on as the battle raged with what he quickly identified as a late-tier C-grade. It was a real struggle and a damn close fight from the looks of it, but the party of eleven persevered. Everyone took damage and was hit back, and Jake had to admit that any person shown in this vision would be able to kill him.

After nearly two grueling hours – that had felt more like a minute due to the entire fight getting fast-forwarded through - the giant beast lay dead, with not a single one in the group falling. The elf in his golden armor now had a bare chest as his armor had been broken, and one of the mages was missing an arm. The one healer in their group was spent, and everyone looked exhausted. All of them had done their utmost and pushed themselves... everyone but one person.

Jake had noticed how the Viper had gone easy. He had avoided nearly all hits and only allowed some attacks to hit him, making it look like he had taken significant damage with his singed cloak and scarred upper body, but in reality, he was in near-top condition.

“Good job,” the elven leader said as they all celebrated. He praised all the members with a genuine smile and also turned to the Viper. “Strolas, you have gone above and beyond once more. Those flasks surpassed my expectations. You truly are the best alchemist in the empire, and I will make sure to mention your performance to my father.”

The Viper seemed thankful as he went closer to the elf. “Thank you, sir, but if I may have one request...”

“What is it?” the elf asked, still happy as he got close to the Viper.

“Would you all kindly die?”

Pride of the Malefic Viper – or what would be known as Pride – descended as a domain appeared. The entire group of celebrating party members became alert as the Viper’s head flew forward and bit into the neck of the elf. At the same time, he lifted his hand into the air as it began glowing a dark green color... and Jake’s Perception of time slowed as he felt it.

Within every single person in the group, a toxin stirred, touched not by his hand but his domain. It was the flask they had all consumed before. Jake did not know what it was made of, but clearly, it had been an incredibly potent toxin in disguise.

The Viper ripped out the neck of the elf before he was blasted back by a flaming sword from the stumbling group leader. He looked at the Viper with shock as black scales emerged on his body and his body morphed into a large black wyvern in seconds.

He froze and didn't properly react. Everyone did. Their mental states were disturbed, their bodies broken from the battle with the beast before, and their resources spent. They even came to learn that the potions they had consumed contained more hidden poison, making them all despair further.

It was a group that Jake felt the Viper could never beat alone in a fight. The elven leader was a match for Villy alone, and if he hadn't been the main fighter against the beast before, they would have had a close fight. But with the element of surprise, them consuming an incredibly potent poison and their already weakened states, the outcome was obvious.

Even then, the Viper took damage as he killed them one by one. His wing was severed and his scales bleeding as he finally stood before the elven leader, who managed to hold on till the end.

"Why... what are you? How?" the elf said in disbelief as he was unable to stand any longer.

"The line between what is a poison and something helpful can be very narrow and blurred. Deceiving the Perception of an amateur in alchemy is not an impressive feat in the slightest. As for who I am... ah, it doesn't matter, now does it?" the Malefic Viper said with a light smile. The elf had already closed his eyes and succumbed to the poison.

Time rewind.

Jake once more saw the moment he activated Touch of the Malefic Viper. He focused on the process and, the second time around, felt that the simple motion had been a marvel of control. He didn't just activate the poison within them all but manipulated it. Amplified it. Sense of the Malefic Viper allowed him to see, Pride allowed him to extend his influence, and Touch to control.

Time rewind.

He felt it all again as more things became clear. He saw all their Soulshapes, and it was like a connection was made to each of them. Through Pride, it was formed...but Pride was not truly what created this connection. It was formed by Touch using Pride as a proxy, the two skills working flawlessly in synergy.

Time rewind.

Again and again, he saw it. He had already been on the precipice before and was just hammering out any flaws. He wasn't even sure if he would have needed to use Path of the Heretic-Chosen to get the upgrade... but he had the uses, so why not? He also feared that the inspiration could leave him if he didn't finish the upgrade there and then.

After thirteen rewinds, Jake got the notification as everything clicked into place, and he felt himself return to the real world once more.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 509: (Un)expected Situation

This vision had definitely been on the shorter side, and compared to his last one where Villy got smacked around by Valdemar, it was also far less valuable. Then again, that vision had consumed two charges of the skill and allowed him to see two future Primordials duking it out with a focus on more than one of the Malefic Viper skills.

Jake was teleported back into the dungeon as expected and was excited to get to his new skill but noticed something was off. Draskil was staring at him weirdly, and Irin was flying over together with Reika and Bastilla. Reika looked surprised more than anything, while Irin and Bastilla looked utterly dumbfounded.

As he was still wondering what was up, Reika poked him mentally and informed him: *"Whatever you just did released a wave of a presence or something... it was yours but different... I think they know you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."*

His brain took a while to process what she had just said as it clicked. *Oh... fuck.*

Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

When he used the skill, he tapped into his direct connection to Villy and momentarily seized it to gaze upon the Records of the Primordial. He hadn't even considered what that could do as all he knew was that he momentarily disappeared... unaware of what he left behind when he did that.

Still unsure what kind of explanation he should try and come up with, Irin made him fully aware he was way past the point of explaining it away the moment she got close.

Without any hesitation, she kneeled in front of him and pressed her forehead to the muddy soil as she spoke in a voice that seemed both pleading and apologetic. "This one greets the Chosen."

Fuck me, Jake cursed internally as he realized he had truly fucked up. As he was about to say something, a prompt appeared in front of Jake and everyone else.

Congratulations! You have cleared the Dungeon: Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns

Objective: Defeat the supreme leader of the mushroom men: the Mushroom Man King (Completed).

Dungeon shutting down in: 00:00:03

He saw the three seconds left just as two boxes appeared in front of them. Jake was quick and opened them both, taking the items in his inventory before he was whisked out of the dungeon.

Jake and the four others appeared outside the dungeon, Irin still kneeling and Draskil still staring. Reika and Bastilla were both in the air when they had exited and were now standing unmovingly on the ground. The unmoving part was not something unique to them as everyone was frozen. Even the air itself had stopped moving.

"Just some simple time magic," he heard a voice say as Villy appeared right beside him. Jake turned to the Viper, who patted him on the back. "Quite the pickle you just made for yourself. You know, every time you use Path of the Heretic-Chosen, you leave behind your anchored Truesoul... but that anchored Truesoul does not have the protection you worked so hard on making with Shroud. Not that it would have mattered as you tapping into my Records clearly leaves behind some traces, and those familiar with me are bound to notice. Now, what was the vision about? We can deal with this entire thing after, I care more about what you saw."

Still uncertain what to do, Jake just gave the cliff notes. "About Touch. It was you with a party led by an elf in golden armor, killed a late C-grade beast, you poisoned all of them with flasks and poisons, killing them and stealing the corpse as well as everything they owned."

Villy failed to hold back a smirk. "You know I am not a believer in fate, but this coincidence is a bit too perfect, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, his brain still trying to make up a plan.

"You see a vision of me killing my own party after a hunt and now find yourself in a situation where you must choose if you want to do the same," the Viper said. "With them alive, I do not see you hiding for long. The girl from Earth managed to solve this issue

by having all those humans she brought with her sign a contract, but that isn't an option here. The demon is bound by a contract already, and signing one of confidentiality in this matter would go directly against that. So, Jake.... what will you do?"

"Oh," Jake said after hearing everything Villy said, not really caring about the last part. "Guess I am kinda screwed then." This chapter is updated by **novel~fire~net**

"You can still kill them," the Viper shrugged. "Sure, the dragonkin may be a bit too much for you to handle, but you can go through official channels and use some of that Chosen clout to get him killed. Just ask Viridia, and I am sure she would gladly remove him or anyone else from existence."

"The chances of that happening are nil," Jake shut it down instantly.

"So you value their lives above your own secrecy?" Villy raised an eyebrow.

"Well, yeah. I can just keep trying to hide or tell people to leave me the fuck alone or something. At the very least, ask them to keep it a secret. Also, you said Irin had another contract, right? Does that contract really require her to report any secret the Malefic Viper or his Chosen told her not to divulge? Sounds like a shit contract."

"Got me there," the Viper said, putting up both his hands defensively. "But I am serious when I say you just made another weak point when it comes to your hidden identity. She will be forced to report *something*. Soon the cracks will spread, and your mask will shatter entirely, revealing the ugly mug of my Chosen beneath."

"I will handle that when it happens," Jake shook his head. "Also, quick question, does this count as time dilation?"

"Nope. I just stopped this cavern; time moves normally everywhere else. Localized time stops are pretty damn basic tools of the god toolkit. Anyway, you made your decision to just come clean to these three, right?"

"Seems like that is what is happening, yeah," Jake nodded.

"Great. Then introduce me to your friends already," Villy said with a teasing smile. The moment he was done speaking, time returned to normal as everyone looked confused. Draskil's eyes quickly darted to the person now standing next to Jake and knelt down instantly, joining Irin, who was still pressing her head to the ground.

Reika and Bastilla stared confused for a moment before Jake realized neither of them had seen the Viper in his human form before nor were Blessed and thus felt his presence. It was like with Meira, and they would only truly be affected once they knew who he was, so if they-

“Hello there, my name is Vilastromoz, but most people call me the Malefic Viper, your pleasure to meet me,” Villy said with a grin.

The effect was almost instant as Reika began shaking a bit before failing to stay upright, with Bastilla making an odd scared whining noise before just straight-up laying down in a fetal position.

Irin, now finally noticing something was off, looked up and saw the Viper standing there. She made eye contact for a fraction of a second before slamming her head down onto the ground again. Not a single word was spoken by her, and it was Draskil who opened his mouth first.

“Draskil greets his Patron,” the dragonkin said in a tone Jake had never heard before. Rather than his usual domineering attitude and tone of confidence, he now seemed as meek as a baby lizard before a true dragon.

“You really wanted to play this casual, huh?” Jake muttered as he looked at Villy.

“No, I actually just wanted to fuck with you a little and have some fun when meeting your little friends,” the Viper chuckled, clearly in a good mood. “And now that I have met them, I can’t be arsed to stay. Since you decided not to kill them, I shall leave the rest to you. See you again a bit later, and by later, I mean in two days as I got some new ale done brewing by then.”

“Can you just leave already to not make this worse than it already is?” Jake exclaimed with exasperation, knowing that the Viper was saying and doing all those things just to mess with him.

The Viper didn’t even respond as he disappeared without a trace, leaving Jake and his party behind with only a final mental message to Jake sent mentally: *“I made a barrier covering this entire cavern so go wild talking.”*

Jake took a few seconds to gather his thoughts and, in a glorious attempt to not address the elephant in the room, began talking. “So... ahem, we should discuss how we split the dungeon loot. I hurried to pick it up and-“

“Jake,” Reika spoke as she looked up with red eyes and sweat pouring down her face, unable to be nice by not pointing out the damn elephant.

With a big sigh, Jake sat down with his legs crossed on the ground. Nobody else moved, and they were all either lying prone or kneeling. “So... yeah... I got the True Blessing of the Viper. We met under weird circumstances, got along well, and here we are. Sorry for keeping it a secret, but things tend to get weird when people know, and if possible, can we just act like I don’t have it or at least not think about it too much? Let’s just return to ten minutes ago mentally, alright?”

He knew he was reaching and knew it was a losing battle. Even after speaking, he knew he was not helping his situation. Jake felt utterly fucked, but he had neglected to consider that there already was one person in the group who knew and didn't act all weird about it.

Reika stood up and took out a handkerchief to clean her brows as she shook her head. "The mere presence of the Malefic One is truly something; I can't understand how you manage to stay upright and so casual."

Jake picked up on what she was trying to do and responded jokingly. "It's mainly the Bloodline, but plenty of practice sure helps."

Their casual demeanor seemed to slightly affect the others as Draskil finally looked up with questioning eyes. He stared at Jake as he frowned. "Why hide?"

At least he asked an easy question, Jake thought as he answered. "Due to exactly what is happening right now. I want to actually have normal interactions with others and not whatever you guys are doing."

Draskil still seemed confused and again asked: "Why?"

"Because that is who I am," Jake just said. "I didn't treat you differently when you thought I had a lower-leveled Blessing than you, did I? I want it to be like that with how you treat me. Also, Irin... why is your head still glued to the ground?"

Irin barely reacted as she shook a little. Jake was about to talk again as Reika stopped him. "Jake... can you go over there for a moment?" she asked, pointing to a corner rather far away.

Jake was confused before he looked at Reika, who gave him the kind of stare that told him he should really agree.

"Alright..." he said as he walked away. *Shit, I am bad at this.*

Wanting to take his mind off things, Jake sat down in the corner nearly a full kilometer away from Reika, who set up her own barrier. He had put it off due to the "situation" but now found the time to finally go over his upgrade and what he had at least gained out of this entire thing.

As expected, the notification he had heard was Touch of the Malefic Viper finally upgrading.

[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Can be used with all

compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 1 Intelligence per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

-->

[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper seizes control of the world. Attempt to inject toxic energy into a being through contact. The nature of the toxic energy is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior or to further empower an existing toxic effect within the target. Allows the alchemist to far more effectively control all toxins he is in contact with when using Touch of the Malefic Viper. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 3 Intelligence per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 175 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

Jake once more considered how damn long those skill descriptions were getting. It was truly proof of how utterly bonkers the Malefic Viper Legacy skills were. The description itself only had minor changes but impactful ones. It no longer said “through physical contact” but merely “through contact,” no-doubt reflecting the synergy with Pride. It also added the effects of empowering existing toxins and even the part about increased control. Rather than one major improvement which he often saw with upgraded skills, it was several smaller things that Jake had been working towards for a long time. The part about empowering toxins was something he had already done before. He had, of course, also trained to improve his control at all times, and the only truly new thing was the use of Pride. Even then, it wasn't entirely new, considering all the training Jake had done when it came to Soulshapes.

The level to his profession was also welcome. As Jake looked at his status, he noted that he was now more than halfway through upgrading his nine Malefic Viper Legacy skills to legendary. He still needed Blood, Wings, Sagacity, and surprisingly enough, Sense of the Malefic Viper. For Wings, he had a good idea what to do, Sagacity, he had a feeling was heavily linked to the drop of blood in his Soulspace, but with both Blood

and Sense, he wasn't that sure where to take them. He decided that he should definitely dedicate more time to them as he wanted to get all four skills to legendary rarity before reaching C-grade, just like he had gotten them all to Ancient before D-grade.

As a final thing, Jake checked and saw that his Dungeoneer title had also upgraded once again.

[Dungeoneer VIII] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +14 all stats.

It was just three to all stats, but everything was welcome.

Having gone through all his menus and some internal reflection, Jake considered what to do now. He didn't want to go through the loot from the dungeon alone and looked over towards the barrier that was still up and wondered what they were talking about as he sent some encouraging thoughts their way.

Go Reika! I believe in you!

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

Chapter 510: Reika & the Insurmountable Task Of Trying To Explain Jake

"Your actions were needless and just made unnecessary trouble for him," Duskleaf said as Vilastromoz teleported back to his usual chambers. "Your intent, I assume."

"You know me so well," the Viper smiled at his disciple.

"Are you disappointed?" Duskleaf asked. "You would have killed all four of them in a heartbeat just to avoid the slightest inconvenience. A choice he didn't even consider."

"No... if I wanted him to be a mirror image of me, I wouldn't like him nearly as much," Vilastromoz shook his head. "Sentimentality can be healthy as long as he doesn't overdo it."

"His Path is not yours and never will be," Duskleaf sighed. "He is far more controlled than you ever were."

Vilastromoz smirked. "You say that... and yet I wonder what happens when he is truly pushed. I believe we shall come to discover that his and my extremes are not that

different. That the lines he is willing to cross are far less controlled and restrained than you believe.”

Duskleaf frowned but didn't speak further. Not entirely able to disagree.

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Reika had been at many social gatherings in her life and done plenty of convincing and negotiating. She had worked for her clan and even argued for more research funding... but trying to convince three fanatics that meeting their god and someone who was essentially a prophet wasn't that big of a deal was way out of her league. To make it worse, then they had hung out with Jake and been casual with him for quite a while already, and this seemed to only hit them harder as they, in retrospect, viewed their actions as insulting if not downright blasphemous. This was clearly not something where logic could win.

After she had made the barrier and Jake was gone, it put a dampener on the mood, and Irin finally lifted her head as she stared at Reika. "You knew?"

"Yes," Reika just answered.

"For how long?"

"Since before we entered the Order. Jake's identity is hidden here but not on our planet," Reika explained. "Back there, everyone with any status knows."

"How..." Irin muttered as she fell silent again.

Bastilla still looked at Reika with disbelief without speaking as Reika sighed. She considered her approach to try and salvage the situation they found themselves in. She knew that her own casual demeanor was already way off from what the three of them would expect of her and would use that in her approach.

Rather than attempt to spin a tale of lies or a new cover-up, she decided to just go with the truth... a slightly modified truth with a good deal of her own conjecture mixed in, but the truth nonetheless.

"You must remember that Jake and I come from a planet that hasn't even had the system for a few years yet. I didn't even believe gods actually existed before the system arrived, and there is a good chance Jake didn't either. Moreover, we come from a world with a modern culture focused heavily on individualism and a belief in personal freedom and equality. At least the parts of the world we were from. No one was inherently superior to others, at least we believed they weren't, and anyone claiming to be better due to their inborn traits was heavily ostracized and looked down upon," Reika began explaining as the three of them listened.

"The concept of others being superior is so foreign to us and also why I personally have a hard time adapting to a world with literal gods. It is a slow process, but I am getting more acclimated to it these days. I know they are superior; I know that a being such as the Malefic Viper is an existence I can barely dream of approaching, and I feel it deep in my bones every time I am confronted with a creature of superior strength and grade. But Jake does not feel this fear. You all know he has a Bloodline, and that Bloodline offers him innate resistance to auras and presences. Due to it, he does not feel the suppression of a god's presence and coupled with his upbringing and inherent values and culture, he simply doesn't share the same sentiment as most everyone in the multiverse. He does not experience fear nor reverence towards those superior to him, and in turn, he does not wish to be viewed as superior either simply due to what or who he is. Let us also be fair, Jake is not the most normal person, even on his best days. I do not say that to criticize him in any way either. Would anyone expect the Chosen of a Primordial to be normal? Has any of you ever met one before? I do not know if it is just me, but if each god can only have one Chosen, is it not only to be expected that person will be unique? And that the Chosen of a Primordial will be more special than any other?"

She needed to speak rather carefully and avoid saying anything too incendiary. While Jake could get away with blasphemy, Reika didn't believe she could. Not in a million years. She also wanted to kind of excuse why Jake acted as he did. The source of this content is *novel•fire•net*

The thing about his Bloodline was something she had pre-approved by Jake a long time ago. She had been told the properties of his Bloodline before and knew it allowed him to resist auras. Parts of her wondered if it had other aspects as well, but it wasn't something she would think about too much and definitely never ask about.

Reika tried to reach them but had a hard time reading the three members of the Order, especially the dragonkin, as she quite honestly had no idea what expressions they made or what emotions those expressions represented. Bastilla also just stared blankly as she likely tried to process everything, and Irin looked deep in thought.

I don't need to convince Bastilla or even Draskil. As long as I get Irin on board and we reach an understanding, she can rope in the two others. Jake will also likely be able to convince Draskil himself, Reika thought as she talked directly to Irin.

"Irin... what are you thinking about right now?" she asked the demon. Even if she had an idea, she still wanted to confirm.

"I... I just saw the Malefic One in person and have spoken to his Chosen several times," Irin said as a stupid smile covered her face.

Not what I thought, Reika quickly realized as Irin kept talking.

"I even approached the Chosen with the intent to..." Irin said as her eyes opened wide. "What have I done? How could I not have realized? My behavior has been utterly unbecoming... should I beg? No, I don't deserve forgiveness; I should just-"

"Hey!" Reika yelled as she chopped the head of the succubus, hurting her hand a bit. "Snap out of it already. Didn't you hear a single word I said before? That he said before leaving."

Irin finally looked up, and with her attention, Reika spoke again. "You know what is really unforgivable? Thinking that if the Chosen and the Malefic One wanted to hide his identity, you could figure it out on your own. Or you believing that any actions you have done while interacting with the disguise he purposefully made weren't something he wanted. Consider it for a moment. Jake already told you why he wanted to hide his identity before. Are you questioning his judgment?"

"I would never!" Irin said dismissively, if not a bit mad.

"Then you still don't get it. This part is primarily my own conjecture, but while we know why Jake wanted to hide his identity, have you considered why the Malefic One approved?" Reika asked, getting a few interested glances.

"While I do not dare claim I understand the thoughts of a Primordial, would it not make sense that this is related to the Path of his Chosen? Perhaps it has been deemed that he benefits from interactions with others without them knowing his true identity. Perhaps it is something entirely else. Either way, the Malefic Viper likely wants us to question his Chosen. Judge his Chosen. Allow his Chosen to grow. For him to make his own choices and walk his own Path not affected by his status. Do notice how the Malefic One even asked the opinion of Jake and seemed relaxed with him. Machinations far above our realm of understanding are taking place, and if we truly wish to show our loyalty, the best we can do is to act as they want of us by not seeing Jake as the Malefic One's Chosen. Even if we do at least recognize it, then we should not use it as an excuse to treat him differently," Reika explained to Irin.

"When I first learned he was the Chosen of the Malefic One, I had a hard time comprehending it, and after coming here to the Order, I have to remind myself every day that treating Jake like Jake the Chosen and not Jake the person goes directly against what he himself and the Viper wishes. So at the very least, try to treat him like a normal person. You have his permission and the permission of the Malefic One to do this," Reika said, only lying a little bit as she didn't ever really struggle with his identity. She also chose to add on one more thing that she only sent to Irin.

"And consider the possibilities. You have an open invitation to approach and interact with the Chosen in a casual way. Are you really going to throw such a golden opportunity away?"

If Reika had learned one thing while in the Order, it was that everyone was inherently selfish. Irin was worried for several reasons, most of them to do with self-preservation and fear of what could happen to her if Jake was genuinely mad or offended. So rather than Irin seeing it as a negative that she now knew, Reika wanted her to see it as something to take advantage of. Jake could deal with whatever the outcome of that was.

Her words clearly reached the demon as Irin seemed to focus and think it over. A few seconds passed before her eyes darted up. "Are you certain that this is truly the will of the Malefic One and his Chosen?"

"Well, no," Reika answered honestly. "But I have yet to be smitten for blasphemy, and I have treated Jake normally ever since we met. He even asked me to join for this dungeon run showing that he clearly isn't offended by my presence or how I act."

"So you just act like you don't know he is the Chosen?" she asked clarifyingly.

"It is more accurate to say that I act like him being the Chosen isn't really that big of a deal. I recognize it, I know it, but I don't make it be what defines him. That is also his wish, and I respect that," Reika once more answered.

"Still don't get why he hides it," Draskil muttered, finally speaking.

Can't tell them Jake doesn't actually think it is that big of a deal and just annoying to be a Chosen... Reika thought as she instead made a roundabout answer. "Who are we to even try? If that is the Path Jake and the Malefic One has chosen, the most respectful thing we can do is to honor their wishes."

She felt like she was talking in circles, but sometimes repetition could be helpful. Reika felt like she had made some good process, but there was still work to do before she felt confident "releasing" the three of them upon Jake.

Jake, in the meantime, had chosen to run away to a place no one else could go.

"Why did you even bother trying to hide your identity to begin with when you can't be arsed to actually keep hiding?" sim-Jake asked the real Jake as they both sat in the Soulspace.

"I just prefer it if people don't know I am the Chosen. It isn't a make-or-break-it kind of deal," Jake shrugged.

"It is more the lack of decisiveness," sim-Jake criticized. "You half-ass so many things. You start doing something only to quit halfway through, or you just stop bothering."

"So I should have killed all four of them?" Jake asked with a scoff.

"I am saying you should have never bothered hiding your identity at all or have been fully prepared for it eventually coming out when you barely try to stay under the radar. You are not going to change the entire multiverse and their views on gods or their Chosen. It is natural to submit to those more powerful than yourself, and they all know it. It is the law of the multiverse, and there is a reason why natural suppression between grades exists. There is a reason we do not feel it either, as we are born to stand beside or above everyone. Better to just embrace that you are indeed superior and then go from there," sim-Jake said.

"We are not having this conversation again," Jake sighed as he stood up within the Soulspace.

"You spent your entire life trying to fit in and adapt to a world you never fit into. Yet now, when you finally find a world you fit into, you try to apply those useless values that only led to the suppression of your Bloodline – of who you are," Jake's other self kept talking. "Why not just accept it? It is an inevitability anyway. With time we will reach levels of power where being Chosen or not has no meaning."

"And at that time, it will at least be earned and not merely given because Villy decided to give it to me," Jake shot back.

"Fair, I at least get that. You don't want to borrow his clout, even if I will say it is earned. Villy has recognized that we are worth it, and I get him. Like I just said, then he also views us reaching the apex as a foregone conclusion, and when eternity is the timeline you are used to working with, why not get ahead of the curve and just recognize us as worth viewing as an equal right away?" sim-Jake said.

"That or die," Jake pointed out.

"True, true. Definitely shouldn't do that," sim-Jake chuckled as he also stood up. "Anyway, enough about that, let's talk about what actually matters. I have been busy while you were playing alchemist, and I wanted some input."

"No, you don't need my input," Jake said.

"Heh, true. I just want to show off my progress," sim-Jake smirked.

"So, you beating up the chimera again?"

"Nah, this isn't about the fighting style this time around but my other project," sim-Jake explained. "Watch this."

Sim-Jake closed his eyes and focused for a moment. He knelt down and jumped forward as suddenly he turned all shadowy. Several copies of sim-Jake then appeared in a line between him and his destination before he finally appeared more than a hundred meters away.

"Space magic," Jake quickly concluded.

"Bingo," sim-Jake said. It is far better than Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra but far from useful yet. So yeah, hold back on upgrading it. Mixing in space magic like I am is already pushing it away from its Origin in Umbra's Legacy, but I need far more to properly make it our own."

Jake nodded. "Alright. Keep up the good work. Anything else to add? If not, I want to go study the drop of blood I stole from Villy a bit."

"Just one thing," sim-Jake said. "Fight some more C-grades with space magic if you can. I got a lot of ideas from reviewing the fight with the Phantomshade Panther."

Jake nodded in understanding as he went towards the red marble floating inside his Soulspace in a desolate area. He hadn't really interacted with it actively that much but thought it was high time he began studying it properly. A full analysis was out of the question, but he should be able to at least figure something useful out.

He didn't know how much time he had either and, quite honestly, was more occupied with passing the time than anything else, so he didn't have to think about the outside world that he would have to deal with pretty soon.

Jake sincerely hoped that Reika would succeed. If she didn't, it would really suck. He had enjoyed the dungeon quite a lot despite the shitty mushroom theme only because he had good company. Not to misunderstand, Jake liked his solo adventures, but he also liked to at least have the option of teaming up. It also had many benefits, as Jake had learned quite a few things from his party members.

If Reika failed, Jake wasn't even sure what his plans were. Would he cut them off? Distance himself? Accept them no longer treating him like before? He genuinely didn't know.

All he could do was hope that it didn't come to that.

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

Chapter 511: Friendships & The Question Of Why They Are So Damn Hard.

It ended up taking Reika another few hours to reach a point where she felt confident letting the three of them roam free. Draskil hadn't really taken that much convincing

when it came down to it, something Reika partially explained away by him also coming from the newly integrated universe.

Bastilla and Irin were much harder to reach as they had grown up with the system and the status quo, making ignoring someone being a Chosen an entirely foreign concept to them. Reika ended up giving a lot of examples of Earth and anecdotes relating to Jake to ensure them that he really wasn't the type of Chosen they assumed him to be.

Irin seemed to have the takeaway that she had just found the opportunity of a lifetime. Draskil seemed competitive, and Bastilla was... yeah, Bastilla was still rather shell-shocked and seemed to not really get the situation outside of "keep it a secret, that is what the Malefic One and his Chosen wants."

Reika just hoped that with time she could have a proper conversation with Bastilla about it... and hopefully not have a really shitty roommate experience in the future.

Jake was woken up from his Serene Soul Meditation when he felt Reika approach. He opened his eyes and saw that she looked slightly worn out, having fought a valiant battle for him.

When she got close enough, Jake asked: "So... how screwed am I?"

"I believe it is manageable," Reika answered. "At least I believe they all understand that keeping it confidential is best and that treating you too differently due to you being the Chosen isn't what you or your Patron wants. If they are actually able to overcome a lifetime of conditioning and cultural teachings and not act too differently is an entirely different thing."

"Thank you either way," Jake smiled a bit sadly. "This entire thing does suck."

"I understand them," Reika added. "At least partly. Me telling them to treat you like you don't have status is a far more extreme version of someone telling me not to treat my great-grandfather with a high level of respect. I am not certain I could stop doing that, at least not on a whim. So the best thing to do now is to give it time. Don't treat them differently than before, but also don't try to put a lid on who or what you are. Instead, normalize it and make it clear that to you, it is simply part of who you are, and while you are naturally proud of it – as any Chosen would be – you also don't want it to be your primary defining trait. That them respecting you as a Chosen and as a person means not making you *only* the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

"Alright... so just give it time, huh," Jake sighed. "Let's get over there. Any tips for things I should or shouldn't say?"

"Don't downplay your identity too much, but as I said, make it clear you do not want it to impact their treatment of you. Not too much at least," Reika once more emphasized. "Also, do not talk about your odd relationship with the Malefic Viper. That is between

you and your Patron, and definitely don't think that you talking about how casual you are with the Viper will make them understand they can treat you casually. Also, when we go greet them, you should say..."

Jake nodded slowly as he took her words to heart. He had enough social awareness to know that he sucked at having social awareness, and even if Reika was not some expert, she was far more adept than Jake.

The two of them walked back to Draskil, Irin, and Bastilla. They did all look at him weirdly and for sure differently than before, but at least they were all standing up and not kneeling. Jake sighed again as he got close and said what Reika had told him.

"I do hope this incident won't cause an unnecessary rift between us. I am still the same person as before. The way I have treated you till now is the same as I would have even if you knew, and I will continue to treat you as friends and not merely subordinates, even if I do recognize a difference in status. I can only hope that you will do the same. Also, I hope you all understand that keeping my identity a secret is something I would very much appreciate," Jake spoke, nearly saying verbatim what Reika had told him to.

The mood was still a bit tense and awkward for a few seconds before Draskil finally spoke up with a grin. "Makes sense now how you killed C-grade before I did."

Jake felt relief as he answered. "Now you are just looking for excuses for losing."

"Bah, only to be expected you win; you are Chosen," Draskil dismissed him before smiling. "But I am still stronger."

"For now, for now," Jake acknowledged with a smirk.

"Excuse me," Irin said, a bit too polite compared to her usual demeanor. "We do have a problem. I am required to report what happened during this dungeon run to my superiors... what should I say to them?"

"What exactly are you required to report?" Jake asked. "How in-depth?"

"I will have to submit a report and then do an interview," Irin said. "If I lie during it or obfuscate the truth, it may have repercussions... and I doubt I will even be able to hide it due to my contract."

Jake nodded and thought for a moment before finding a solution. "Alright, then just do as usual and report the truth. I will handle it on my end."

Taking out his token, Jake dialed the highest of the higher-ups when it came to the mortals – the Hall Master. She picked up instantly. The latest_ept_sodes are on_the **novel•fire•net**

"How may I be of assistance?" Viridia asked.

She sounded a little bit too excited he had called, but nothing he could do about that. *"My identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper has been discovered by three new individuals, and I will need you to help cover it up."*

"Very well, are they already slain, or do you wish for me to do it while cleaning them of karmic bonds?" she promptly answered.

"No killing," Jake shut down the murder-hoboing. *"One of the people is Irinixis from the Humanoid Resources department and another the Malefic Dragonkin Draskil. Irinixis will need to file a report of what happened during a dungeon run we just had, and I want you to intercept that report and make up an excuse that you wanted to keep track of Draskil's progress or something like that. Maybe use his Divine Blessing as an excuse."*

"As you command, I will handle it, so have no further worries. Is there anything else I can help with?" Viridia said, not missing a beat.

"No, that is all for this time. Thanks for the assistance."

"The honor is all mine, Lord Thayne," Viridia said as Jake cut off the magical phone call.

"Alright, I got that angle covered," Jake said as he put his token away again. He had only taken a few seconds talking to Viridia through the power of telepathic efficiency. If not, it would be rude to make them all wait around.

"How?" Reika asked curiously.

"I am the Chosen, am I not? I had the Hall Master deal with it. She naturally already knows who I am," Jake said a bit jokingly, seeing no reason to mention that her finding out had also been a complete accident.

Irin nodded with some relief, not at all surprised. "Thank you, my lord," she bowed before stopping herself. "Oh, I mean, I am sorry, I-"

"Irin, just take it slow, alright?" Jake smiled. "No need to fret over minor things like that. Take your time and just treat me normally, okay? And a better thing to do than talking about this situation would be to address the loot we got from clearing the dungeon. But I must warn all of you... while I have not seen the properties of these items, only their appearance, I can already tell you they fucking suck."

With a very necessary warning, Jake summoned the two items. One of them was a scepter just like the one the Mushroom Man King had used, while the other one was just a mushroom cap formed like a crown. With disgust, Jake identified them.

[Scepter of the Indigo Caverns (Epic)] – A scepter crafted from unknown wood that has fused with the Lifecore of a once mighty fungus. Through time it has further been improved by the Mushroom Man King and empowered by the Indigo Caverns. Allows the user to directly manipulate and take control of fungi, using them as their weapon. This scepter can be attuned to specific fungi to further improve this effect. Significantly more powerful when used by one also wearing the Mushroom Cap Crown of the Fungal Lord.

Requirements: lvl 180+ in any humanoid race.

[Mushroom Cap Crown of the Fungal King (Epic)] - The crown of the Mushroom Man King. Contains elements of his authority, making you inherently intimidating and hold authority over other Mushroom Men of a lower level than yourself. Allows the wearer to far more easily manipulate fungi using any form of magic. Significantly more powerful when used by one also wielding the Scepter of the Indigo Caverns.

Requirements: lvl 180+ in any humanoid race.

His sheer level of disgust only increased after reading what they did. Without hesitation, he voiced his own stance as he disowned them both.

"Not me!"

"No," Draskil muttered decisively.

"I have no need for them," Reika quickly made clear.

"It would feel inappropriate to take anything," Irin said.

All of them turned to look at Bastilla, who had not spoken a single word since Jake had come out as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. She looked bewildered for a moment as she stared at the items and the party. "Really?" she finally spoke.

"I believe you can at the very least sell them for dismantling," Irin pointed out.

"If you don't want them, I would be fine with just destroying them here and now," Jake added on.

"I'll just take them..." Bastilla muttered as she swept them up. Jake threw Reika a glance, and she gave him a look making it clear that the beast woman was still not entirely on board and handling the situation properly. But, as her roommate, Jake believed Reika would have plenty of time to figure things out.

He was at least happy that even after everything was said and done, they could still bond over their shared hatred for mushrooms. A true unifier.

"Alright, thanks, everyone," Jake said with a genuine smile. "Let us head on back to the Order?"

All of them agreed, and Jake tried to make some casual small talk with the succubus on the way back, but all the responses were a bit strained from Irin's side. Draskil was a pleasant surprise as he seemed to have come to terms with things rather quickly and acted almost the same as before.

Reika walked with Bastilla as they made it back as one group, no one bothering to race this time around. They made it back to the teleportation station before splitting up. Jake didn't know how everything would be whenever they met again, but he could only do as he always did and just take things as they came.

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Jake stepped through the gateway and walked to the living room before sitting down, exhausted. He had already seen that Meira and Duskleaf were busy inside the library, and he had no interest in interrupting them as he just took a breather.

He got half an hour of rest by himself before he saw Duskleaf whisk out of existence within the library. A few minutes later - after cleaning up - Meira also left and went straight for Jake in the living room, likely having been informed by Duskleaf.

"Lord Thayne," she bowed upon entering the living room.

"Hey there," Jake said with a smile. "How have things been while I was gone? Duskleaf treating you well?"

"The Grand Elder has treated me very well, and I have made much progress," Meira said enthusiastically. "I also did as you said and invited over some of my fellow students."

That made Jake perk up. He looked at Meira with surprise and motioned for her to elaborate.

"We only went to study in the library due to the many tomes Lord Thayne has available, and I swear that not a single book has left the residence. I thank you once again for allowing me to invite them and also offer thanks from them," Meira explained.

Jake felt genuinely happy that at least Meira seemed to have some real friends. It was good to know that she could at least have some healthy relationships considering Jake's recent issues in that department.

"I would love to meet them the next time they come over," Jake added. Meira seemed quite a bit happier recently compared to how she was when Jake first met her, and

there was a good chance that had something to do with her friends, right? Her just having friends was a major improvement.

He did notice that she seemed a bit hesitant when Jake asked to meet them, but he didn't really dwell on it. It was normal to be a little nervous when introducing your friends to who was essentially your boss.

Now, Jake was not entirely ignorant and knew that Meira likely didn't have the same understanding of what friendship was as he did. This was part of the reason why he wanted to meet her friends, also to see if they were good or bad influences.

"I shall relay your wish," Meira said, as she added on a bit nervously. "Uhm, one of them, named Izil, also said that she wanted to meet you if possible..."

"Oh?" Jake asked, surprised. Why would she want to meet Jake? Okay, there were many reasons. She knew he had a black token, so that was likely it. But he didn't want to judge right away and think that she was just after his status or trying to take advantage of him. Heck, she maybe had a status of her own.

"Who is this Izil?" he asked.

"She is an elf from the Altmar Empire," Meira explained, adding on with a smile. "She has helped and taught me a lot of things."

Okay, so she does have some status of her own and doesn't seem like a shit person, Jake noted.

"Well, I already said I would love to meet your friends, so of course, I will also talk to her," Jake said, still smiling comfortingly.

"Thank you," Meira bowed again. "I shall let you know when next they request to come over."

Her phrasing did make Jake frown a bit, but he didn't dwell on it. The two of them talked a bit more before Meira had to leave for a lesson, and Jake also quickly got busy himself. He had a few Malefic Viper Legacy skills he wanted to work on improving and he also kind of wanted to take his mind off things and be by himself a bit.

At least until Meira would have friends over.

A day that came sooner than expected as Meira told him they would come the very next day, not even two days after Jake returned from the dungeon.

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

Chapter 512: An Offer Difficult To Refuse

Jake had seen a more nervous than usual Meira off as she went to one of her classes. He knew it was because she wouldn't be returning alone but had agreed to bring her friends along. It would be a lie if he said he didn't find it endearing and waited expectantly as he also worked on his own progress in the meantime.

He had appropriately begun scouring the library for books related to the Legacy of the Malefic Viper and had also searched for lessons related to the skills but quickly found a rather glaring issue on both these fronts. There were no books directly about the Legacy skills, only legacies in general, and on the lesson front, there were only really some related to Palate of the Malefic Viper. Jake did stumble across a scarce few related to Sense and Blood too, but both of these were incredibly low-level ones and seemed to be more about how one could obtain the skills. Quite a bit away from finding a way to upgrade it to legendary rarity.

So rather than looking for direct sources on how to upgrade his skills, he began researching the more general methods of upgrading Legacy skills and ways of upgrading skills close to what Jake had. Perception-based sensing skills to find herbs or toxic materials and whatnot were extremely common and well-researched, so Jake happily dove in and began reading. He decided to first focus on ways to improve the far less impressive Poison Sense Jake had merged into Sense of the Malefic Viper, hoping to find some inspiration.

His enthusiasm quickly dwindled as Jake went into the section on practice methods. As with most things, the best advice given was just to get practical experience. However, the books heavily advised against the alchemist trying to test and improve sensing skills during combat for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was overly risky to try and focus on it during a fight. Secondly, you wouldn't know your opponent properly and what skills they had to avoid your senses and their poison resistance, making progress far less reliable. Third, it was just hard to properly focus and think logically and analytically while in a battle. Using the poison on someone far weaker than yourself wasn't as helpful when researching as using it against someone of equal or superior power, which is why the alchemists who had written the book recommended the same thing: living test subjects.

They suggested "investing" preferably in a slave or a bound creature to do this with. As you needed someone or something stronger than yourself, it even mentioned that renting one was possible, but emphasized that another great benefit of living subjects was the ability to use the same one and track the progress that way. It reduced the number of factors that came into place with using new test subjects every time, and if one got a sapient slave that was professionally trained, they could even have skills to

convey the effects of the toxins – something especially useful when experimenting with mind affinity poisons.

As Jake read all this, he was a bit taken aback. Not by what it said, but by how it was written. It was clearly considered normal and not at all something anyone would question. It mentioned using these subjects with the same phrasing as one would use about any other type of tool like a cauldron.

Needless to say, Jake was not going to get any test subjects, and the more he read about it, the more he understood why Meira had kind of assumed that would be part of her job when she first met Jake. It was, in the eyes of the Order, considered a task akin to tending the gardens or any other service the slave could offer.

Jake still wanted practical experience with his Sense of the Malefic Viper and ended up finding some good things. There was a training dungeon set up by the Order that one could spend AC to enter that housed a lot of different toxins with innate properties to hide as well as some beasts and monsters to practice on. Making a mental note, he decided to visit one of these places.

On the subject of Blood of the Malefic Viper, it was a bit of a dead-end as the lessons were either about how one could possibly gain the skill or how to use the skill in alchemy. There was one lesson that seemed worth checking, and Jake also mentally noted that.

As Jake was still researching and doing some light alchemy, whenever he got bursts of inspiration, he felt movement within his sphere. In the entrance hall of the mansion, four figures stepped out. One of them was naturally Meira, with the three others an elf, a scalekin, and a very tall dwarf or small ogre. Half-ogre, Jake guessed.

He didn't move to greet them as they all headed to the library as expected. Jake saw them all walk and talk, and everything seemed nice. A cursory look made it clear the half-ogre was primarily a close friend of the scalekin while the other elf stuck closely with Meira. Meira did seem a bit out of place, but Jake saw her smile whenever she answered, making him a bit happy.

They entered the library, and Meira began finding some books as the other elf helped. The scalekin and half-ogre just sat down at a table as they waited. It almost looked as if they hurried Meira, but he wasn't sure, considering he could only see and not hear anything happening.

After locating the books, they took their seats and began discussing things. Jake simply looked on as nothing noteworthy happened for the next fifteen or so minutes. Finally, Meira said something to the other elf, her customary nervous face on full display. The other elf nodded as the two of them left the library, the scalekin seemingly yelling something after them.

At that moment, Jake cursed the ever-present enchantments on all the doors and walls that isolated sound, effectively making every room the inside of an isolation barrier. Meira and the other elf headed straight for Jake's laboratory, where he had spent the last few days. They talked a bit more, and just before Meira could knock on the door, Jake made it open telekinetically.

What? He wanted to show off a bit in front of Meira's friend.

"My Lord," Meira bowed the moment she saw him. Jake was sitting in a rather comfortable chair behind a table, feeling a bit like a boss about to interview a new employee.

"Hello there," Jake greeted them with a smile. One they couldn't really see as Jake had chosen to keep his mask on. Turning to the other elf, Jake nodded. "You must be Izil?"

The other elf confirmed as he bowed slightly. "Indeed. It is a pleasure to meet you, Hunter, was it?"

Oh yeah, I used that pseudonym. Kinda forgot about that, huh? Jake thought. "Just call me Jake, and please, come in and take a seat," he simply answered. He honestly couldn't be arsed trying to conceal his real name. Irin knew it, which meant the entire Humanoid Resources department knew it, which meant anyone with just the slightest level of clout could find out.

"Thank you," Izil answered as she entered the laboratory. She looked back towards Meira and then back at Jake. "If possible, can we speak just the two of us?"

Jake wasn't that surprised, considering she had asked to meet him. He did wonder what she wanted and really hoped it wasn't something weird. Chances are she wanted to take advantage of his status even if she only believed he was a black token alchemist.

"Of course," he still answered. "Meira, if you will."

She nodded and bowed but did look a bit nervously at both Jake and Izil. Meira was naive but not stupid and likely had some of the same thoughts as Jake... or maybe she was just afraid Izil would offend Jake, making Jake kill her. She knew who he really was, after all.

After she left, the isolation barrier activated, making no one able to spy on the two of them anymore. With great interest, Jake allowed Izil to speak first after sneaking in an Identify.

[Elf – lvl 141]

"Firstly, I must thank you for meeting me. I am aware you are a busy individual," Izil said courteously, but Jake already knew there was a "but" coming down the line. "I am Izil, a

royal associate of the Altmar Alchemy Association and currently a gold token outer member of the Order of the Malefic Viper.”

Jake nodded, having already introduced himself before. He didn't see any need to explain he had a black token, as she clearly knew, though he was a bit surprised at her being a gold token.

”I believe you already have an inkling as to why I am here?” she then asked.

In a hurry, Jake tried to figure out if he should know why she was there. *Nope, I have no bloody idea why or how I should know, but...*

”It is related to Meira, right?”

It had to be. She was the only commonality between them.

”Correct. Just to clarify, then Meira is a slave which you own or at least have the ability to decide ownership of?” Izil asked very matter-of-factly.

Jake nodded.

”Firstly, and this may be overreaching, may I ask why you are having her attend lessons as she currently is? From the research I had done, then you have a backer making you able to afford some splurging when it comes to Academy Credits, but even so. What is your intent?” she asked, making Jake feel like he was being interrogated.

”You *are* overreaching,” Jake dismissively said. ”You do not need to know what I intend, but if you are worried, then I can at the very least assure you I mean no harm to Meira. All I want right now is for her to learn and grow.”

”How about the future?” Izil asked. ”I am aware you are from the new universe, so it is understandable if you do not know this, but the Altmar Empire has a standing order in place to free and help return elves found in involuntary servitude to the Empire.”

Okay, Jake did not know that. He was a bit skeptical, but when he thought on it further, it made sense. The Altmar Empire was an empire of elves, and according to what he knew, a bit, eh... ”judgemental” towards those who were not elves. For a race believing themselves superior to not want their brethren to be slaves or maybe even viewing it as an insult if some were wasn't surprising. It did raise some questions as to why there clearly were many elven slaves around, but that wasn't a discussion he wanted to start. However, even if such a standing order was in place from the Altmar Empire...

”I do not see what that has to do with me,” Jake answered.

”I mean no offense,” Izil quickly made clear. ”I am merely saying that the reason I approach you is backed and supported by the Empire, and so will any eventual

compensation. In essence, I am asking for the possibility of buying out Meira's slave contract."

"Oh?" Jake asked, a bit interested. His plan had always been to find a way of freeing Meira. Currently, he wanted her to become a fully-fledged member of the Order by herself, but if there were alternatives, he was open to it.

Izil understood that Jake was not entirely against the idea and smiled.

"This proposition is not only to benefit the Empire or you but Meira as well. She has shown quite the talent from the moment I met her and seems to only be growing in potential. Especially very recently, she has had tremendous improvements. For her to remain a slave is simply wasteful in my eyes. If she was free, she could also return to the Altmar Empire, where even more possibilities exist. Additionally, and this is merely my own personal feelings, then I am fond of her and wish to see her grow and forge her own Path. One where she is free."

Jake listened on, and while he didn't say anything, he was debating it quite a lot internally. If Izil told the truth, it was a truly good offer. It would allow Meira to get her freedom and stop being a slave, and it would even allow her to go to the Altmar Empire. All around good stuff and a difficult offer to refuse. Oh, and of course Meira had made a lot of progress in recent times. She was being privately tutored by a god.

"it is worth discussing," Jake concluded. "But it is not something I believe the two of us should ultimately decide. It is Meira's choice."

Izil looked surprised at Jake's response but still nodded a bit tentatively.

Jake then stood up and motioned for Izil to follow. "I will admit, I have kind of been hoping to meet her friends, so I shall come along when we go fetch her."

Izil now looked even more confused and surprised. "Those two people in the library with her right now aren't her friends. Nor mine, for that matter. We were asked to group up for a collaborative project for sparring purposes, and the two of them made her an easy target. I stuck around at first to try and recruit her, but I was hesitant due to her meek personality. And as I said... I have grown fond of her. But those two are definitely not friends, I can guarantee that."

Jake frowned. "Explain."

"The scalekin is called Nella and is the daughter of a true dragon who got together with an influential B-grade member of the Order of the Malefic Viper, while the half-ogre Utmal is nothing more than an attendant of her family who managed to enter the Order due to sheer nepotism. Her status is not to be underestimated, and she knows it. I hear that she has even more powerful relatives, some even reaching above B-grade. In other words, they are not to be offended, even if you are blessed by the Malefic One and

have a black token," Izil explained. "While I am not sure if I can call their treatment of her outright abusive, they..."

Sighing, Jake listened as Izil explained their group's dynamic. Nevertheless, Jake was still insistent on going. He couldn't say he was surprised that Meira's interpretation of friendship wasn't normal, but he was still a bit disappointed. But more than disappointed, he was just sad. From what Izil said, they were just taking advantage of her.

Taking advantage of him.

"I implore you to not make any rash decisions," Izil said as they exited the library, and she sensed his negative emotions.

"I won't," Jake said.

The two of them walked toward the library as Jake observed it in his sphere, and now with some context, Jake saw that the scalekin's yelling likely wasn't just friendly banter. The snickering of the half-ogre also clearly wasn't innocent. Read full story at [movel*fire*net](#)

Still, Jake wanted to keep a cool head and not pass judgment only based on the words of another. He would judge the situation himself and ask Meira to figure out what was going on. As they got close enough to the library, Jake noticed the door had been left slightly ajar, allowing some sound to escape.

"How fucking incompetent can you be? I can't comprehend why the hell that owner of yours bothers to keep you around," he heard the scalekin say as Jake froze.

Froze - and considered if Viridia's offer of corpse disposal was still available.

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

Chapter 513: A Teaching Moment

Jake was no expert in friendships. He would never claim to be. But what he did know was that the scalekin called Nella was definitely not a friend of Meira. Now, while Jake did want to just barge in and raise hell, he chose to listen to Izil and acted with thought. At the very least, he should give them a chance to explain themselves.

The door was already ajar, and they soon detected Jake as he got closer. It was almost comical how the facial expression of the scalekin changed when she detected Jake and Izil coming. Rather than a sneer, she turned to a neutral smile, trying to look like less of a bitch.

“My Lord,” Meira greeted her once he entered. He had seen her running back and forth collecting books, and yet she didn’t carry even a hint of discontentment.

“Ah, good to meet you-“

“Shut the fuck up,” Jake said to Nella the moment she started speaking. His aura flared for a moment with killing intent as Izil took a step back along with Nella. The only one of the newcomers who stayed unaffected was the half-ogre, and the reason for that was simple enough.

[Scalekin – lvl 152]

[Half-ogre – lvl 190]

Utmal, as she was called, was far stronger than any of the others, and Izil’s assertion she was more of a bodyguard than anything else was very likely accurate.

Nella still stood frozen as Jake spoke and Meira looked extremely surprised, if not downright horrified.

“Meira, have you ever had any friends before?” Jake asked her.

The poor elf now looked even more confused as she stuttered. “I... I don’t think so?”

“Then let’s have a brief lesson on what friendship is,” Jake said as he turned to the scalekin. “Tell me, do you consider Meira here a friend?” this chapter is updated by [m0vel*fire*net](#)

Nella, surprisingly enough, didn’t raise a ruckus but merely responded honestly. “What a nonsensical question. Of course I don’t. Now, if you weren’t so rude despite it being our first meeting, I would maybe consider offering you the honor of my frie-“

“You can shut up again,” Jake cut her off once more, getting a very angry glare from the half-ogre, which he completely ignored.

Meira looked entirely taken by surprise after Nella answered. Jake nearly felt like she was about to cry, but instead, she just nodded with realization and bowed. “I apologize if I misunderstood, and-“

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Jake also cut Meira off.

Izil finally decided to also get involved after the initial shock of the situation. “Nella, at least admit you did purposefully make her believe you were friends, even explicitly stating it to make her give you things.”

“You just have to get involved?” Nella scoffed. “And yeah, I did. What of it? This is the Order of the Malefic Viper, if you haven’t noticed. Are you seriously trying to act like lying for personal benefits is some kind of heretical sin or something? You people are beyond me; it is her fault for being a gullible idiot, not mine.”

She then turned to Jake and smiled. “Don’t blame me for taking advantage of your little pet project. Is it not your fault for being too wasteful?”

“I guess you could argue it is my fault for not being more observant of the trash I allow her to drag home,” Jake said in a cold voice.

“My Lord, I-“ Meira began, and Jake was honestly a bit frustrated as he knew what she was about to say.

“Meira. Stop. Stop putting yourself down and stop thinking everyone can treat you however you want. Stop thinking you are lesser than them. I am not having you learn and take lessons for fun but for your own sake. It is about time you have some damn self-confidence and take some charge of your own Path,” Jake said in a rather scolding tone as he pointed at Nella and Utmal.

“Those two are nothing. Trash by the wayside. If you allow trash to treat you as lesser than them, what does that make you? What does that make me who choose to believe in you? What does it make your teacher?”

Jake felt like he had been very patient with Meira so far, but her mindset was simply too different from what it had to be to survive. Not just in the Order but in the multiverse. If his gentle approach didn’t work, he would go a bit harder. Even after everything, Meira still viewed herself as lesser than practically everyone else. He hadn’t really picked up on this as the only ones he really ever saw her interact with were himself and Duskleaf, and expecting her to be casual with them was a hard ask. But she had gotten better with Jake, making him hopeful.

It was just disappointing to see that hope squashed.

And speaking of getting squashed, the two unwelcome visitors clearly weren’t fans of Jake’s words.

“Big words from some new initiate who just entered the Order. Do you think you are suddenly a genius unlike any other just because you managed to get a black token? People like you tend to just squander and have their feeble egos broken as they begin to fail. So what if you have a backer? You are still nothing,” Nella said with a smile as she motioned toward Meira.

“You are already showing your weakness when you bother with a little whore like her. You waste time and resources on useless things. I don’t even get what you are trying here? Sure, yeah, sorry for hurting your fragile ego by messing with what’s yours. I had my fun with your whore while it lasted, and I will of course respect it if you don’t want me to mess with your property.”

“Nella, you-“ Izil began but was cut off.

“Oh, shut up already; you are even more tiring than the human,” Nella said with scorn. “I wanted to approach you to do some networking with the Altmar empire, but you are just too damn infuriating to deal with. Always having to be the hero and protecting the little elf but never even daring to really speak up. At least you were smart enough not to make unnecessary enemies, unlike the human.”

Now, one might ask why Jake allowed her to keep talking. The reason was simple enough: he needed Meira to hear. While she had initially seemed like she wanted to explain things away and even excuse Nella, he now saw a far different expression. It was hard to read but definitely a mix of anger and crying. What he was certain of was that she was hurting.

He did also see Izil look ashamed when Nella pointed out her own lack of truly standing up for Meira. Jake chose not to judge this particularly harshly as at least it seemed like she had her heart in the right place. He also wanted to keep making it a teaching moment.

“I can at least respect the confidence,” Jake said with a smile. “The confidence to walk into my home acting like this and expecting nothing to happen.”

“Heh,” Nella laughed. “Last time I checked, we were allowed to come here. Are you so daft to not even know the rules of the Order?”

Izil, off to the side, also sent Jake a warning using telepathy. *“Be careful. Any violence, especially killing, goes against the rules, and even if you have some influence, so does she. Keep calm.”*

“Oh, I do know the rules,” Jake said as he walked over to Meira. He saw her still looking utterly lost with tears in her eyes as he spoke. “Meira. These two aren’t your friends. They never were. Don’t consider this a tragedy but merely a teaching moment. Believe it or not, in spite of our unconventional relationship due to the contract, I consider you a friend, which is also why I want to give you a choice before we go any further.”

She looked up at him, and once Jake was certain she was listening, he explained what he and Izil had talked about. “Izil and I spoke just before coming here. She offered to buy your freedom and make you a part of the Altmar Empire. Even take you back there. With the status of a citizen of the Empire, it will allow you to finally take charge of your own life.”

Izil seemed relieved at the subject change, and surprisingly, Nella and Utmal also seemed interested.

“That is correct,” Izil said with a smile. “The Altmar Empire has an official decree to free any elven slaves, and the second I found out you were one, I knew I had to talk to your owner. While we have not discussed any details yet, I-“

“One Credit,” Jake quickly added. “That is the price for her freedom - for the complete annulment of the contract. We can discuss the details, sure, but I do not want anything for it.”

Izil and Nella both looked surprised, but not as much as Meira. She stared between Jake and Izil before asking Jake. “You want me to leave?”

Jake sighed. “It is not my choice. But I can share with you that my initial plan was for you to become a member of the Order and then annul the contract. I want you to be free and make your own choices, and this will be the first time where I will truly ask you to choose after I made you choose your own lessons. You don’t need to pick right now, but can take however long you need to-“

“I want to stay with Lord Thayne,” Meira said decisively, shocking Jake a bit. She had not only interrupted Jake but said: “Lord Thayne” and not any of her usual go-to’s. Her decision was also not what he had expected, especially not for her to make it so fast.

“Think it over,” Jake said. “This is a chance for freedom. Here and now. If you need funds, I will help you and make sure you can go to the Altmar Empire safely. You will be able to finally be your own person. Meira, you are far more skilled than you think and can make it on your own. You don’t need to rely on others.”

“I want to stay,” she said decisively again before finally turning a bit meek. “Please?”

“Oh, this is all so damn touching,” Nella finally burst out as she turned to Jake. “Damn, you must be a good shag to have her wrapped around your finger like that, or is she really just that pathetic?”

“Lord Thayne and I have never slept together, and I have never been with a man,” Meira said, standing up for herself for the first time. In a weird way, but hey, it was something.

“So you can talk back?” Nella said, faking amazement. “And that declaration just makes this all the more pathetic. Seriously, is your dear master some limp-dicked loser who can’t even get it up? Or does he swing the other way and bought the wrong product when he went slave shopping? This must be one of the funniest days in my life.”

“I... you suck!” Meira practically yelled, red in her face.

Nella just found it amusing and shook her head. Jake was still looking on a bit proud before nodding. "If that is your choice, fine. But the part about being freed and becoming a member of the Order is non-negotiable unless you can find another way to safely be freed. We can talk about all that another day, though, as we have some trash to take out first. Tell me, Meira, what kind of punishment do you think these two deserve?"

She was still new to the whole making choices thing, but Jake believed in her. Also, while he wasn't exactly keen on the two of them, the one they had wronged the most was Meira, not him. So even if Jake had a way he wanted to handle the situation, he would respect whatever Meira wanted.

"This is a fucking joke at this point," Nella laughed out loud. "Actually too funny. Seriously, what the fuck are you gonna do? Do you think you can even do anything? Want to call your backer or what? While I don't want to talk badly about my seniors, I am beginning to question what error in judgment one must have made to pick you. I also find it laughable how you think you are some big-shot who is in charge here. If you truly try to start shit, it won't just be your ass, but your backer's on the line, as I am certain my ancestors will happily raise hell. So go ahead, make my day even better."

Meira still stared at Nella and Utmal as the scalekin spoke. Utmal just smiled at Nella's side, making it clear she also found this entire situation funny. Jake had the clear read on them that they were truly just taking this as some kind of entertainment. Perhaps messing with Meira had just been some way for them to pass the time while getting some benefits. They had never considered it a big deal to begin with.

After a few seconds of no one talking, Nella finally shrugged and looked at Jake. "I am bored of this. Oh well, fun while it lasted, and I shall consider sending someone to ask for compensation for wasting my time. The level of delusion you people have is astonishing. I hope your backer comes to their senses and gets rid of you because anything else would truly make them a moron."

"Punishment..." Meira muttered as she looked at the ground, still standing with Jake. Her speaking made Nella and Utmal wait with anticipation as something finally happened. Meira then turned to Izil with searching eyes, but the elf just looked down at the ground, making it obvious she would not involve herself further. A bit cowardly, but again, Jake would not judge her as she was essentially a representative of her faction.

Meira instead looked at Jake, who just waited for her answer. "I don't like them. They did wrong... but more importantly, they insulted Lord Thayne, and... the one behind him... that is not just wrong, but unforgivable. I..." she continued, looking towards Izil.

Nella smiled, and Utmal beside her also chuckled. They still had the same confidence. Jake had not asked them to leave, and they both felt safe. The rules of the Order protected them, they had backing, and Utmal was at a higher level, even compared to what Jake was falsely displaying. They had every reason to feel confident. They had

just made one major fuckup— one with such a minuscule chance no one could really fault them for missing it.

Jake understood what Meira meant by looking at Izil as he smiled. Before anyone could react, he was in front of Izil and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter. He placed his hand on her forehead as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, sending in a pulse of soul-soothing poison, instantly knocking her out.

“Now that I did not see coming,” Nella said with some surprise. “You also didn’t like that bi-“

“You know,” Jake cut her off as he saw Meira look worried at Izil and with genuine hatred at Nella and Utmal. “I am nearly grateful to you. It is good for her to learn that shit people exist and to be careful of them, and you two are prime examples of shitstains.”

Nella wanted to speak, but Jake didn’t let her as he released his aura along with Pride of the Malefic Viper.

“Now, you talked about rules earlier,” Jake said as he walked slightly closer. Utmal placed herself in front of Nella defensively as she prepared herself. He could only laugh at her horrible stance, showing that while she was probably strong, her actual level of fighting experience was limited.

“While this isn’t a rule I remember being stated explicitly, what are the punishments for blasphemy of the Malefic One?”

“Death,” Meira answered instantly.

“Come the fuck on, just because you have a lesser Blessing, you think insulting you is-“

“Nah, not at all. But calling the Viper a moron for choosing to back me? Now that I would say is very much in the camp of being questionable,” Jake smiled. “But I don’t know. I am not the one making the rules or even the one enforcing them, so let’s ask someone more qualified.”

Jake took out his token and sent a simple message before putting it away again. “She should be on her way, but in the meantime, I believe I shall make the executive decision of doling out some punishment of my own.”

Seeing as they were in his library, Jake thought it preferable to first get them out of there. His aura flared as he used Pride and Gaze to launch a mental attack, stunning both of them momentarily as Jake teleported forward and punched both of their faces as he tossed them into the hallway, smashing into the wall. The construction of the mansion was at a level where he had no way to even damage it, resulting in both of them coughing up blood from the impact.

Utmal got up to respond in a hurry, but Jake was already there. His katar flew forward and stabbed her in the chest just as a large hammer appeared in her hand. His other katar punctured her dominant arm holding it as he tore the one in her chest upward, slicing her chest badly. The half-ogre tried to counter but, despite her level, made a pathetic attempt.

She was stabbed multiple times in the chest before Jake finally finished her off with an uppercut through her chin and out the top of her skull. Utmal never got a chance to fight back.

Jake didn't even bother with the notification as he turned to the stunned Nella, who held her token in her hand.

"You are fucking insane!" she screamed. Just then, there was movement as two auras descended. A man and a woman, both wearing robes with the motif of the Malefic Viper, appeared inside the hallway as they observed what had happened. Jake knew what they were. Enforcers.

"This madman went insane and killed my companion!" Nella screamed the moment she saw them but still had the energy to throw Jake a glance with glee at the misfortune she expected to overcome him.

Yet no such thing happened. Both of them merely bowed as a third person teleported in.

Nella stared at the Hall Master as Viridia didn't even acknowledge her presence before bowing towards Jake, joining the two other enforcers as she spoke. "I greet the Chosen."

It was at that moment Nella knew - she fucked up.

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Chapter 514: Two Very Different Fates

The entire hallway was silent. Jake couldn't help himself as he enjoyed the look on Nella's face. She looked so utterly horrified and confused. It was a wonderful contrast to her formerly smug and overly confident demeanor that made it clear she believed no one could touch her and nothing she ever did was wrong.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," Jake greeted Viridia with a smile. "I take it your two colleagues are also in the know?"

“They are both bound by a contract with the Order and have absolute confidentiality,” she answered assuredly as she finally addressed what was happening. “Can you explain the situation?”

“You know what?” Jake said with a rather sinister smile as he motioned toward Nella. “I think we will have her explain it. Nella, would you be so kind as to explain what is happening here?”

Nella simply sat frozen as she stared for a few more seconds, not even recognizing Jake had spoken to her. She finally seemed to collect her senses somewhat as she stared at Jake. “You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?”

“Now who is the daft one?” Jake asked jokingly as he quickly turned to Viridia. “Oh yeah, that is one of the reasons why this entire situation is as it is. She called me dumb, and I am pretty sure she also called the Malefic Viper a moron at some point?”

“I... you misunderstood, I-“ Nella tried to explain but quickly shut up after getting a stare from Viridia.

“To summarize, she offended the Chosen and potentially the Malefic One?” Viridia asked.

“When you say it like that, it sounds bad, but yes, that is exactly what she did. The one I killed didn’t really say anything but was just her silent cheerleader,” Jake answered casually. He had to admit, he was probably enjoying this way more than he should, and it was only helped by Meira looking completely fine with everything that was going down. Happy, even.

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Viridia simply nodded and asked. “What are your plans with the two remaining visitors?”

“Leave the elf alone; I knocked her out to avoid her seeing any of this. As for our dear scalekin, I shall figure that out promptly, as you quite honestly arrived far faster than I had anticipated. So if you would do me the favor of waiting outside until we are done, it would be great. Afterward, I may need a bit of a clean-up crew,” Jake explained to them.

“As you wish,” Viridia bowed as she and the two enforcers simply teleported into the garden in front of the mansion. This left Nella, Jake, Meira and an unconscious Izil left alive in the hallway. One could ask if it was necessary to call Viridia there, but he decided to do so to make it absolutely clear how much Nella had fucked up. It was pure vanity and, honestly, just the fastest way to convince her he was actually the Chosen.

Nella looked up at Jake and did exactly what he expected her to: beg.

"I... I didn't know," Nella said as she fell to the ground and pressed her forehead against the floor. "I beg for your forgiveness and will do anything! Please, my family can compensate you handsomely and... I... I can even become your slave!"

Jake just sighed. "You still don't get it, do you? I don't give a shit about you. Never did. The one you need forgiveness from is not me but Meira. She is the one in control here."

Nella's eyes darted to Meira instantly, and groveled at her feet. "Meira, I am sorry; I would have never done those things if I knew! I beg you, please, I will do anything you want."

Meira looked at Jake with misty eyes as he asked her: "So, Meira, what do you want to do? These are your enemies, not mine. True, I did take the initiative with the half-ogre and got my own personal frustrations out, but this one is all yours."

"Won't... won't it expose you as the Chosen if she goes free?" Meira asked with concern.

"Maybe. But I already told you that no matter what, I will respect your choice... though, no, I will not have her become a slave," Jake answered.

"She doesn't deserve to be either," Meira muttered as she looked deep in thought before finally asking him. "Lord Thayne, why are you being nice to me?"

Jake was taken aback by the question. His usual response would just be not to bother with her. If he had just wanted her to be a member of the Order and get out of his hair, he wouldn't do what he was doing with Nella either. While he certainly had felt a considerable amount of responsibility for her as she had been dumped on him by the Viper, he didn't act solely out of duty. He considered Meira a friend, even if he did know that was entirely one-sided as she viewed him as her superior in every way. So... the real reason was probably as simple as they came: he didn't really have one. He just wanted to.

"Because I decided to be," Jake answered with a smile. "You don't need some profound reason for every decision. Sometimes you just go with your gut and see where that leads you."

Meira nodded as she looked down at Nella before looking back at Jake. She finally gritted her teeth as she stammered out. "I... I suffered a lot before I came to serve Lord Thayne. But after coming here, I have been treated so well, and I even did things for myself. I then met Izil, Nella, and Utmal, and I thought I had finally even gotten friends... but they were just using me. That hurt more than even the poison resistance training... and when I was being tortured back then, I hoped every day that my torturer would just drop dead."

Nella opened her eyes wide as she continued begging. "I never did anything that bad to you! I just did what everyone would do, and it was never personal or done to hurt you! Please believe me, if I had known, I would have never—"

"You would have never even spoken to me if you knew I was a slave..." Meira said sadly. "I didn't think I had to hide it, but after you and Utmal found out, you treated me worse than before... why did you need to be cruel? If you had actually been a friend, I would have helped anyway."

"We can start over! I will never disrespect you again, no matter what!" Nella said, grasping for straws. "Please!"

Meira just sighed sadly as she looked at Jake. "I have never killed anyone," she said in her usual meek tone.

Jake didn't answer but just acknowledged with a nod. It made sense she had only ever killed mindless beasts, if even that, considering her healer class.

"I am not sure I want to either..." she muttered as she seemed to finally have made up her mind. "I think we should hand her over to the enforcers and the Hall Master and have them decide on a punishment."

Jake failed to hold back a small smirk. They all knew what that meant.

"Please! Meira, don't do this. Didn't you say you considered me a friend? Can you really do this to your friends, I—"

She didn't get to say more as a robed figure appeared within the hallway and instantly knocked her out, with Viridia and the other enforcer appearing a moment later. Jake had naturally let them know that Meira had decided and conveyed her choice.

"Are you sure you want to leave the last elf be? We will be able to cover this incident up rather easily if all loose ends are removed," Viridia said as she motioned toward Izil.

Jake looked at Meira even if he knew the answer, and she vehemently shook her head as expected.

"Nope, leave her be. It may lead to complications down the line, but it is what it is," Jake answered her.

"Very well. How do you want these two to have died? With honor or disgraced? We can even make it a scenario leading to severe punishment of their ancestors and families if you so desire," Viridia asked.

Meira looked incredibly uncomfortable at the mention of going after their families, and Jake also thought that was overdoing it.

“Meira, you are still in the arena of decision-making here,” Jake informed her.

“I don’t want their families to suffer because of what they did... they already lost someone, and that is enough...” Meira said in a rather weak voice.

Jake nodded. “Have them die with a modicum of honor. I will leave it up to you how to handle it.”

“Very well. I intercepted the scalekin trying to send a message out of this residence with her token earlier, and I will use that to make up a story by sending messages to relevant parties. How about them bringing back a valuable item to the Order but dying in the process? That way, we will offer slight compensation to their families on account of their deeds. I doubt they will ever raise a ruckus with this approach, and if they do, well, I shall also handle that,” Viridia offered.

Meira nodded after Jake threw a questioning glance at her. Also, he really wanted to ask about her intercepting messages sent from the token and apparently being able to doctor messages too. Jake had not heard anything about that being a thing, as all official information indicated it was an absolutely safe form of communication within the Order. Turned out that was a fucking lie.

“That will be fine, and once more, thanks for your help. Just to let you know, I don’t plan on making this a habit,” Jake said a bit jokingly.

“I would not complain if you did,” Viridia smiled as she bowed.

After a few more pleasantries and thanks from Meira to Viridia, the Hall Master and two enforcers left, bringing along the unconscious Nella and the corpse of Utmal. They even made all traces of them having ever been there disappear - corpse and all.

That just left the minor problem called Izil. Now, Jake had absolutely no plan on how to hide his identity from her. Not because he didn’t want to hide it, but because he had made a spontaneous decision to knock her out to at least give himself a chance. He considered what kind of story they could spin but came up short.

If he said he killed them and had his backer cover it up, she would instantly know that was either a lie or his backer had to be really far up in the hierarchy within the Order. It would almost have to be a god and considering his Blessing, he could see her figure it out. Gods did not back someone blessed by other gods, which is why the basic assumption had always been that Jake had a mortal backer, as any god would have to be the Viper, and that surely couldn’t be a thing.

“How long will she be unconscious?” Meira asked with a hint of worry.

“Eh... not long? Hopefully. The poison isn’t harmful by itself but is good at knocking people out and making them calm as can be. It shouldn’t take more than an hour or two, I reckon,” Jake said with a smile and a relatively high level of confidence.

Something that would later turn out to be a mistake.

Irinixis sat and stared into thin air while waiting to be called into the chamber. Her time since returning from the dungeon and figuring out Lord Thayne was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had been anything but calm, and she had been flung into a whirlwind of bureaucracy and intrigue.

For the top brass to involve themselves in the dealings of a D-grade or even C-grade was incredibly rare, if not downright unheard of. So when an order came down from the Hall Master’s office to report anything related to Draskil and his group directly to them, it raised quite the fuss. When it became clear that Irin had been part of the dungeon group with him, the fuss turned to her as she was swarmed by colleagues and superiors, eventually leading to her being called by the leader of the Humanoid Resources Department. The mortal leader, that is, as one of the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon now sat at the very top.

Irin understood why a god would not get involved as that would make it clear that someone in the group was well and truly out of the ordinary. As it was, then one could at least find explanations for why the Hall Master wanted the report directly. With the Order undergoing a renaissance after the Malefic One returned, a lot of things were done differently than before.

Nevertheless, she was nervous about what her superior would ask her. Would she try to probe and figure out details about Draskil? The Malefic Dragonkin was at least an excellent red herring, and with the Hall Master actively helping by specifying interest was on him and not Lord Thayne, she hoped the Mistress wouldn’t ask too much about him. While Irin had plenty of confidence in herself, she didn’t at all believe she could resist the probings of the Velvet Mistress. She was an S-grade succubus, and Irin had heard she was approaching the demi-god tier. For someone like her, Irin was like an open book.

“Irinixis, please enter,” she suddenly heard a voice as she was thrown out of her thoughts. She hadn’t even noticed the attendant approaching her.

“Thank you,” Irin bowed to the attendant as she got up and walked through the gate in front of her. She appeared within a mostly red room with silk-like cloth hanging from the ceiling so far above she couldn’t even see it. The room was filled with a thin red mist as Irin saw a woman lying across a bed on a slightly raised platform.

“Irinixis, my child, I am so glad you had time to come visit me,” the Velvet Mistress spoke as she sat up on her bed and tapped the spot right next to her. “Come over here and join me.”

Irin was incredibly nervous but didn't dare argue as she went over. When she got closer, she finally properly saw the Velvet Mistress. She was a succubus like her, but Irin did not dare compare herself to the woman in front of her. One could only describe her as a personification of beauty, and even Irin found her face reddening as she approached.

The Velvet Mistress was a famous figure and was known to have many lovers from all sorts of places. There were even gods on her list of usuals, and her personal network of information could rival that of some factions. Yet she had chosen to be the leader of the Humanoid Resources department of the Order of the Malefic Viper because apparently "the one who got away" was part of the Order. It had long been a topic of discussion among the demons who this mysterious man could be, but none had figured it out quite yet, and the Velvet Mistress certainly wasn't sharing.

Irin, who had found herself lost in thought again, finally found herself in front of the Velvet Mistress. The Mistress took her hand and made her sit on the bed beside her as she smiled. "I am sure you have many questions as to why I asked you to come. Contrary to what you may believe, I am not going to question or interrogate you. Things are changing within the Order, and everything is telling me you are finding yourself rather close to the epicenter of this change. While I cannot be sure, I feel confident enough to bet on it."

"What does the Mistress need of me?" Irin asked, unsure and a little bit uncomfortable being too close to the woman. She felt her face heat up as the Velvet Mistress smiled again and leaned closer.

"I want you," she said in a teasing tone before giving Irin some space as she stood up, leaving the young demon beet-red in the face.

"I am serious. If you are truly close to the epicenter of this, you will need to be up to the task. We cannot lose out simply because we miss our chance, now can we? So I have an offer for you, my dear. I haven't had a disciple in a few thousand years, but what do you say?" the Velvet Mistress asked in a tempting tone.

Irin didn't even need to consider it before nodding, as she was in a state halfway between shock and elation. Within only a few days, she had gone from just being just another random employee of the Humanoid Resources Department to sitting in the room of the Velvet Mistress being offered to become a disciple.

All because she had been randomly assigned to a certain group from the ninety-third universe. One that happened to include a certain extraordinary human that had become the impetus of change for the Order of the Malefic Viper by making their Patron return to the world.

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Chapter 515: “You are never going to let me live this down, are you?” - Jake Thayne

So, some good and some bad news. On the good side, Jake had now figured out how to put other people in a coma that they didn't seem to wake up from by themselves even after three days. On the bad side, Jake had now put someone into a coma and didn't really know a way to wake them up.

Izil had been “sleeping it off” on the couch for a full three days, and Jake's initial assessment of it only taking a few hours tops for her to wake up had been a little off. In his defense, he had kind of gone in with the assumption that Izil had some kind of innate poison resistance like everyone else seemed to, but Meira made it clear Izil never worked with poisons at all. She had come to the Order to learn about poisons exactly because she lacked knowledge in that area. So yeah, pretty big oopsie there.

The type of poison he had infused was inspired by the ethtoxin he had killed the big blue mushroom under Haven with – the kind that was incredibly hard to detect and eliminate. So hard to eliminate that Izil's body didn't seem to register it as harmful and had just absorbed it all into her very soul within a short period.

At least it appeared to be slowly losing effectiveness by itself, but with how slow it was, Jake reckoned it would be measured in months and not days when she would wake up by herself. Maybe, in hindsight, it wasn't a good idea to infuse so much damn poison that fast just because he wanted to knock her out instantly?

Meira was beside herself with worry, and all Jake could do was assure her that Izil was technically fine. It wasn't like she was in any danger from the toxin, and as a D-grade, she didn't have to drink or eat. Jake had, on the third day, turned to Villy despite really not wanting to because he knew what was coming. He had chosen to do so during a time when Meira was out and attending a lesson in case the Viper decided to do exactly what he did next.

The very second Jake tried to contact the god, Villy popped into his living room like he had been waiting. “Finally, you come crawling! Fucked up a bit, now have we?”

“Yeah yeah...” Jake muttered, having already accepted the incoming mockery. “I messed up and now must ask my honored Patron for any advice on how to fix it. I considering infusing her with more poison to counteract it, but that just seems like a bad idea.”

“Definitely something you should only do if you have confidence in your abilities and full knowledge of both poisons. So yeah, that is totally out of the question, considering your recent track record,” Villy smirked.

Jake sighed again as he tried to briefly change the topic. “How did it go with those two?”

Villy knew what he was talking about and shrugged. “Viridia handled it. She made some smoke and mirrors, sent some fake messages, and reported to the family that the scalekin was from that she died during a mission. She then gave them some compensation and what is essentially an entrance ticket to the academy for any youngster they want to send here.”

“Are you sure there won’t still be trouble down the line? I can’t see them not investigate and raise a ruckus if they find something amiss,” Jake said, a little worried. Mainly for Meira as she had interacted with them for a long time, and he feared that they would approach her to investigate.

“I think you severely overestimate how much these factions actually care about some D-grade dying. Even if they suspect something is amiss, they won’t do anything about it. The only reason large families like that would make it an issue was if they felt slighted or to save face. What you did is quite the opposite, and one of their members dying for the Order only reflects well on them. In fact, I have a feeling they will gladly play into the story and make use of it,” Villy explained. “While the bond between parent and child may seem strong to you as a human from a newly initiated universe, it matters little to most who reach high levels of strength. I guess you cannot fault them, as when you outlive your child number one hundred, it gets hard to care for each one individually, and you begin to view them more as assets than people. It is only if they prove themselves and become strong that the parents will begin to actually care. Well, that, or have talent making them worthy of recognition.”

Jake frowned as he heard this. It was hard to grasp parents not caring for their kids at all. Okay, maybe they did care a little, but still. Maybe it was just his pre-system mindset and his relatively young age that made him think that. For someone that had lived for tens of thousands of years and had hundreds of children, perhaps it was just a natural reaction to seeing your children die to begin caring less. A defense mechanism, perhaps.

“Ah, but I do want to note how funny it is that you go so far to hide your identity as my Chosen and yet freely and happily make use of the benefits it offers,” Villy teased.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to hide it if it didn’t come with my life turning into a damn circus of clowns wanting to suck me off. I never hid on Earth that I am your Chosen and happily answered anyone who asked because people there didn’t have the insane reaction to it everyone has here. Believe it or not, I am not embarrassed to have that True Blessing,” Jake smirked in response.

Villy smiled for a moment before he shook his head and looked at Izil, who was sleeping on the sofa. "Alright, let's get on with the topic on hand. If you want to wake up that elf, you have a few obvious choices. Here, let me play teacher a bit: what are your options from your limited point of view?"

Jake had already been ruminating on the topic for the last three days and, of course, had a few ideas. "With my newly upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper, I can try to control the poison and extract it from her by isolating it somehow. I could also try to make an antidote that directly targets the energy of the ethtoxin to make it go away faster. Lastly, I considered making a toxin and then controlling that poison to wake her up by attacking her soul to get a response."

The snake god listened on as he nodded. "All very good solutions, except for the fact that the poison has entered and been integrated with her soul, making it far harder for you to do anything with it."

"Exactly," Jake agreed, having already figured that out. Usually, a poison would operate within the Soulshape and physical body of a target, but this poison had entered a deeper layer of Izil's soul, and Jake couldn't truly detect or feel it anymore. He only vaguely got a sense of how much there was remaining from Sense of the Malefic Viper. And even that was only because he had made it and thus had a far easier time sensing it.

"So, you are all out of ideas that you fear won't end up causing more harm than good?" Villy asked.

"More or less," Jake said with resignation.

"Alright... Jake, I must admit, for a simpleton that usually does the simplest shit to solve a problem, you have really gone above and beyond yourself this time," the Viper said as he failed to hold back a laugh. "Tell me, what does the poison you injected do?"

"It soothes the mind and makes one relax," Jake answered.

"Okay. So what would be the best kind of antidote to that?" the snake god asked leadingly.

"Something that un-soothes the mind and makes you unable to relax?" Jake asked, a bit confused before it finally clicked.

"Oh... fuck me," Jake muttered as he face-palmed. "You are never going to let me live this down, are you?"

"No. No, I am not, oh my dear Chosen. So, what is the complex solution to this absolute mind-bender of a conundrum?" Villy asked with a massive grin.

“A slap or a solid shake...” Jake said, embarrassed.

“What is that? Oh, I think if you yelled loud enough or splashed some cold water on her, it could work too,” the Viper laughed as Jake wanted to crawl into a hole.

He had not put her into a coma... she was just fucking asleep. A long sleep, sure, but any external stimuli should wake her up in a jiffy the moment her soul had finished absorbing all the poison. He had essentially only “knocked her out” for ten minutes, with the rest just being her sleeping.

“Okay, change of topic. When do you think Meira is ready to apply and become an official member of the Order?” Jake asked, desperately not wanting to talk about his fuck-up anymore than necessary.

Villy, in his infinite mercy, agreed and answered with a shrug. “I am not really following her progress as I quite frankly don’t care, but I am sure Duskleaf knows. However, chances are, she could join on her own merits by now. The only real thing standing in her way is her mindset and absolute co-dependency on others.”

“I thought you didn’t care to know about her?” Jake asked.

“I don’t, and yet I know that. But enough about her, you should get back to work and actually get some levels under your belt and upgrade some of those skills. Chop, chop, I didn’t give you infinite Academy Credits and an entire Academy to play around with for you to waste time on sleeping elves and petty drama between D-grades,” Villy said, his voice quite a bit more serious than usual.

Jake frowned a bit at the sudden sense of urgency. “Is there something coming up?”

Villy just smiled. “You are in a newly integrated universe... there is always something coming up. Now get moving, and good luck. I still got that ale ready for next time when you aren’t so preoccupied.”

“So, a sense of urgency, but I still have time to drink with you?” Jake asked jokingly just before Villy left.

“Naturally. Being my drinking buddy is an absolutely essential task as my Chosen,” the Viper said before waving. “Bye!”

With that, he was gone, and Jake was left alone with Izil in the room.

“Gotta make up a bullshit story for Meira,” Jake muttered. He was not going to tell her that Izil had been sleeping for three days just because no one had bothered to wake her up.

Jake waited for Meira to come home before he woke up Izil, feeding her some bullshit story that he had found a solution and eliminated all the toxins. Once she was awake, Izil looked confused around before going into a flurry of questions.

A lot of lying, deceit, and convincing later, and Izil left. She definitely knew the story they had fed her was false, but at some point, she had just stopped questioning them and accepted their horrible tale. He had tried to go with the official version that the Order had made and said that he had knocked her out as he revealed who his backer was and wanted to keep it under wraps, and after a heated discussion, Utmal and Nella left.

They had then promptly accepted a mission, done it super quickly, but died in the process within just a few days. Yeah, the more Jake thought about it, the more clear it became that the story was absolute crap, and everyone knew it. Jake didn't think Izil knew he was the Chosen, but she definitely knew something was way, way off. Enough wrong for her to stop probing.

"Do you think Izil and I can still be friends?" Meira had asked after the other elf had left.

"I don't see why not," Jake answered truthfully. "Just always be a little less trustful of others, okay? Even Izil. Be on the lookout for her probing for information and maybe even call her out on it if she asks. At some point, me being the Chosen will be revealed to everyone, and I am sure she will understand why you chose to hide it then." The most update n0vels are published on novel-fire.net

Meira didn't seem entirely sure about it but still nodded and thanked Jake for his help. Over the last three days, Jake had noticed some subtle but very welcome changes in Meira. Firstly, she used "you" way more when addressing Jake than before. She also came and asked for stuff at times and didn't seem to try and hide away most of the time when Jake was around. While he wouldn't say she appeared confident, she was at least a little less timid. Still super timid overall, but baby steps and all that.

The following days were thankfully without any distractions or blowback for anything that had happened recently. He didn't hear anything from Irin, and all he heard from Reika was an update that Bastilla was still freaked out but way calmer. Draskil had chosen to leave on a solo mission not long after they returned from the dungeon and would likely be gone for the foreseeable future.

This allowed Jake to once more focus on what he had come to the Order to do: alchemy. Alchemy and improving his profession skills. Jake quickly fell into a schedule that consisted of research, crafting, practicing skills, going to lessons, and having the occasional resistance training session with Meira, often if not always coupled with Duskleaf teaching him about formations. On top of that, he had a certain simulacrum to deal with whenever he meditated.

It was understandable if one viewed this as overwhelming, but one had to remember that Jake had all twenty-four hours every day. He never slept or rested and just kept

working. If he ever got tired out from a certain task, he would simply switch to something else. Slight headache from reading hard-to-understand tomes or just returned from a lesson about improving sensory skills aimed at a level far above D-grade? Do some mindless crafting. Low on resources from mindless crafting? Work on improving skills. Lack of violence? Go train with sim-Jake and fight a chimera.

Like this, days turned to weeks as weeks soon turned into months. There was little change in what he did, but the sheer scope of tasks made things never seem samey, and he always had something interesting to pursue. Halfway between the second and the third month of this particular session, there was one shake-up of the usual schedule. One Jake had been waiting for and looking forward to.

The final skill selection for his profession in D-grade.

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Chapter 516: A Real Anomaly

The levels had come faster than Jake expected during this particular training session. Maybe it was because he was actually crafting a lot this time around, but it could also be due to him simply progressing in so many areas at the same time. Not that he had any way to truly find out, as the system wasn't very liberal with sharing information on exactly how experience worked. Shit, for all he knew, the recent "D-grade drama," as Villy called it, could have helped him progress. Anyway, it got him to 180 in his profession, which gave him another skill selection that he had very much been looking forward to.

*****DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 180 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 176 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

Jake liked skill selections, even if he had to admit a lot of the initial excitement and enjoyment had begun to wane the more he got. It was rare that he was offered more than one or two skills he would even consider, and the only truly interesting skill choice he had recently was the last one for Avaricious Arcane Hunter which made him go back and pick up the common rarity Stealth Attack skill. That one had actually taken some thought and not just to pick the highest rarity one every time. After skipping the fucked up ones, like the curse or slavery-related skills, of course.

But the level 180 skill selection was a bit different for one simple reason: it was the last one before C-grade. Each profession or class came with some built-in skills that would be offered no matter what, and often the best was saved for last. For his class in E-grade, it had been Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, a skill that was still extremely potent now.

He hadn't really had one for his profession in E-grade, but that was due to him hunting down the nine "of the Malefic Viper" skills, making him not really care about anything else. But this time around, he had no such thing. In fact, the last two skills he had picked for his profession had been about rituals and core refinement, both things that weren't part of this core skill set. Truth be told, Jake didn't really need that many more alchemy skills due to how all-encompassing the Malefic Viper Legacy skills were. This did also mean he had no idea what to expect when he saw the prompt and opened it.

****Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available****

Jake would usually go through the options one by one at this point. He would write some off for being weird and more just view his offered skills as representations of the progress he had made. But this time was also different in that aspect.

The offerings were the usual ones. There was an upgrade to Graft Plant that seemed a bit interesting, a skill about creating special acids that he maybe would consider, another one about curse magic that he didn't want, and finally, a fourth one related to Jake leading group prayers for the Viper that he noped the fuck away from.

He barely registered these as he went to the bottom skill. As said, then Jake had no idea what to expect from this final skill offering, and he had to admit, it was a surprise. A good one... maybe?

[Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)] – Heresy and orthodoxy united in one body, power claimed from both. To be both a Chosen and a Heretic requires not only mental deviancy but a truly anomalous soul to reconcile opposing concepts. A soul that only grows more unique as you walk further on your Path as a Heretic-Chosen. Due to your connection to your Patron, your mana will begin to carry faint hints and morcels of the Records of the Malefic Viper when crafting poisons, making each creation more potent. Due to your identity as a heretic, this is not granted but taken, resulting in significantly increased mana expenditure during this process. As your soul mutates, so does it get empowered, allowing it to break convention. Going forward, every stat point in Wisdom increases your Mana Points by 12.5 rather than 10. May your very existence become an anomaly that shuns normalcy for power as you continue paving your own Path as a Heretic-Chosen. Note that this skill results in a permanent change. Losing your status as a Heretic-Chosen or your profession will make the skill further mutate and transition into a race skill.

It was weird. Just weird in so many ways. This was a skill of a type he had not been offered before, that was for sure. It was entirely passive from what he could see and did something Jake always looked for in skills – it had an ability he could not in any way replicate himself.

But this one felt a bit out of the left field, even if he should ask himself if it truly was. Jake walked a very weird Path, and he intermingled many concepts and Records with himself at all times. The mere fact that his Soulspace was as powerful as it was proved that Jake was an anomaly, as Villy had made it very clear that sealing something like the Eternal Hunger chimera in there was not something a D-grade should ever be able to. He knew this was likely just a side effect of this Bloodline, but his choices also had to have contributed. Integrating sim-Jake had only strengthened him further, too.

The actual effects of the skill were in the simple department, at least from the looks of it. It was essentially an all-around buff to all poisons Jake crafted, with the downside being an increased mana cost during the crafting process. On top of that, it granted an overall increase to his mana pool. The biggest part of the skill was clearly the mana pool from Wisdom, and this was also what he was the most worried about.

This skill would permanently alter his soul. It would give him 25% more mana, which was even more together with the existing 25% bonus from the Mask of the Fallen King. However, he knew that these kinds of alterations did not just come for free.

His soul as it was could already be considered fully utilized, so to somehow expand it had to come with losing something in return. There had to be some consequences. The system had some innate sense of “balance,” and even if gods like Villy found ways to slightly skirt around these balancing mechanics, Jake was not at all at a level where he could do that. At least, that is what Jake believed. He wasn’t sure at all, though. Gritting his teeth, Jake delayed his choice for a moment as he asked his Patron god:

“Villy... is skills that permanently alter your soul generally considered good or bad?” he asked his dear Patron god after reaching out.

“I will need some more information than that,” Villy asked in return near-instantly and seemed very interested right from the get-go.

“I am offered a skill that allows every point of Wisdom to give more mana than it already does, but it permanently alters my soul in return,” Jake answered.

“Do you, in turn, lose some of your stamina or health?”

“No,” Jake answered. *“It also allows some of your Records to get mixed in when I craft to make poison better at a higher mana cost, but it doesn’t seem directly connected to the Wisdom part. And it is the Wisdom part I am worried about.”*

“So, you are wondering what else you will lose to allow you to get this increased mana pool?” Villy asked.

“Yeah,” Jake nodded. Latest content published on [novel•fire•net](#)

“Firstly, did you know that while the 10 points per stat are pretty standard, it isn’t universal? In fact, it is only really a thing for the so-called enlightened races. Many beasts have innate racial skills, especially those of massive size, that make each point of Vitality give them far more health points per stat. How else do you think a massive mushroom that is around your own level can have a mana pool ten times your own? Or how a massive whale the size of a planet doesn’t waste all its vital energy to heal a minor wound? But you are right in your case as an enlightened race; it usually comes with a trade-off. The trade-off is built into the races who gain these racial skills, but for you, as a human, you have no such thing. But I think I see a way and an explanation for you to be offered it anyway without the usual trade-offs,” Villy said after explaining something Jake honestly had kind of figured out a long time ago. If not, then it made no sense how he could fight and damage beasts for so long without them dying.

“What way?” Jake asked curiously.

“You are walking your own Path that is already incredibly hard as it is. Your soul is already ridiculously powerful as it is, and you can handle this mutation without losing yourself at all. That is why you get it offered, I reckon, as, without a powerful soul like yours, the system would never even give you the choice of risking such a mutation. As for the price of the skill... I think it lies in proving your Path. To put it in simpler terms, you increase the Records you need to progress, and you have to prove yourself more than before to gain each level or evolution. Along with that, then faltering in your Path may lead to downright disastrous results. I am talking a full-on soul implosion or you evolving into something very unpleasant,” Villy explained.

Jake listened as he tilted his head. *“Doesn’t seem like an actual drawback? Or more just something I already deal with as a high-tier profession? Wait, will it make each level slower to get experience-wise?”*

“It is an extreme drawback for most, and no, it will not make each level easier or harder. At least, I don’t think so. Jake, I need you to understand that you are really walking your own kind of Path here. You are forcefully channeling the Records of a Primordial through your soul without dying, you experience true Records of a time long passed, and you have a Soulspace far more powerful than any D-grade I have ever encountered. You are a heretic and a Chosen at the same time while getting away with it. Your sheer level of ego is forcing two opposing concepts to unite within you. So I do agree... the actual drawback a soul mutation brings likely won’t negatively affect you as you are already a damn anomaly and a freak,” Villy said. Jake was not entirely sure if the god was praising him or not, but he chose to take it all as a compliment. Also, Jake had not shared the name of the skill, but Villy still called him an anomaly, so clearly, he agreed the skill fit Jake.

“Anyway... good skill? Also, how come you didn't pop in this time but chose to keep the conversation telepathic?” Jake asked two questions at once.

“Of course it is a good skill. Very upgradeable, too, I reckon. Don't worry about evolving it, by the way. Improving it should not increase the drawback at all. Why do you think all my Legacy skills can only be obtained at Ancient rarity and below, where they only give one stat point per level in your profession? As for why I didn't pop in, well, I got my own stuff to deal with sometimes. This is one such time where I don't want to dedicate an avatar to visit,” Villy explained.

“Fair enough, mate. Thanks for the help as always, and good luck with your endeavors,” Jake said his goodbyes. He had a feeling Villy didn't wanna share what he was up to and naturally respected that.

“See you around, and keep up the leveling,” Villy said in return as the connection was cut off.

Without delaying further, Jake selected the skill.

Are you sure you want to select *[Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)]*? This skill will lead to permanent alterations to your soul.

Another prompt asked him if he was really sure, once more putting emphasis on the skill not being a casual choice. With resolution Jake confirmed. The moment he did, he felt an odd sense of vertigo. His Sphere of Perception momentarily retracted entirely into his own body, and all of his senses were completely cut off. It was only for less than a second before his sphere spread out again like before, and all his senses returned.

He expected more to happen, but it didn't. The only thing that felt different was Jake now feeling a slightly larger pool of energy he could pull from and control. Jake wanted to make sure nothing had somehow gone wrong as he checked his status.

Status:

Health Points (HP): 50198/50210

Mana Points (MP): 60123/100296

Stamina: 31851/37060

Yep, his mana had increased from around 80.000 total to over 100.000. It was so odd that having his soul change and mutate didn't do more than it had. So very odd. Jake stared at his status for a good while longer before reaching a conclusion.

“My stamina is way too fucking low compared to my mana points now.”

Okay, not a conclusion as to why he didn't notice a soul mutation more, but as to what a big future issue would be. Currently, Jake never really ran out of mana during a fight as he already had a large pool and further increased regeneration from the mask. Then there was the occasional poison he was infected with or the mana from the Scales of the Malefic Viper legendary upgrade, which allowed him to absorb a bit of energy from magic attacks.

This meant his current bottleneck when it came to Endurance was his stamina. Rather fitting considering the name of the resource pool. Still an issue, though. But he had just the solution - he just needed for Meira to return first.

He spent the next few hours testing out stuff and drinking mana potions to fill up his pool to see if that felt different. Jake had wondered if maybe he would feel it when it went above the 80.000 he had before the skill, but nope, not a problem.

After four hours, Meira came home, and Jake quickly approached her in the hallway. "Hey Meira, wanna come shopping with me?"

Meira was taken aback at the sudden question. "Are you sure you don't just want me to go out and acquire the desired products as usual?"

"Yeah, I'm sure I want to go myself this time and wondered if you didn't wanna come," Jake answered with a smile. "I also wanted to take you shopping to finally get you some proper equipment. You are above level 140, so there have to be some good things available for your level by now that you can hopefully use for the rest of D-grade."

While Jake had leveled a lot, Meira's speed was far faster. When Jake had first met Meira, she was level 109. So even if her skill was not meteoric, it was still pretty damn fast, and one had to remember that she was not grinding levels through fighting and nearly only with her profession. She had mentioned getting quite a few class levels, too, due to her healer class benefitting from some things, but it was only three or four levels.

"Equipment?" Meira asked with genuine confusion. "Why?"

It was a pretty good question. Meira could borrow everything she needed for alchemy, and Jake had gifted her a spatial item quite a while ago for convenience's sake. So why the equipment?

"The world sucks, and you will need to learn how to fend for yourself a bit better, so I think getting some practical experience under your belt would be healthy," Jake said.

"I... is Lord Thayne sure?" Meira said nervously.

"Yeah. Don't worry, won't have you join a war or something, just do a few dungeons or go hunting a bit with a party. You will be fine," Jake said to try and calm her down. Didn't work very well, but what can you do?

“Okay...” Meira muttered. “What does Lord Thayne need to buy?”

Jake smiled. “A whole lot of elixirs.”

What better way to get more Endurance than that?

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Chapter 517: A Small Shopping Trip

The last times Jake went shopping, he had either gone to the vampire place because he also wanted to sell stuff or went with Villy to get new clothes. All other shopping was done by Meira after that for a few reasons. First of all, it saved Jake time. Secondly, Meira was incredibly insistent on doing it as she was almost desperate to prove herself useful – something that had gotten better recently – and lastly... Jake had no idea where the hell to go shopping in the first place. Like, he had some ideas, and he could just go where he went last time with Villy, but he didn't feel confident. The problem was that the place he and the Viper went was fucking huge, and Jake really didn't want to wander around for hours on end to try and find what he was looking for. Could he ask someone for directions? Probably, but that was also something Jake really didn't wanna do. Asking strangers for directions sucked.

So dragging Meira along and buying some equipment for her was just killing two birds with one stone. The two of them left only about an hour later, with Meira taking the lead and first bringing him to a place primarily dealing with alchemical products.

The Order of the Malefic Viper didn't have any official stores, and as far as Jake knew, there was no massive trade emporium run by them either. All the stores one could encounter were run by individuals or other merchant organizations that simply operated within the Order. All the Order really got out of it was a small tax added on each product sold and payment for the spaces they occupied. This system allowed individual merchants to use the Order to progress and for alchemists from the Order to easily earn money by selling their products to one of many merchants eager to work as their broker. A bit like how Sultan had helped Jake.

He would probably love it if I brought him to the Order and had him get a store here, Jake thought as he entered a large street from one of the many large gateway-obelisk-things spread throughout this part of the Order.

Jake had gone to the same general area as he had gone with Villy. This was pretty much the epicenter of trade for the Order and filled with shops catering to every kind of

customer. To call it an entire city was no understatement as Jake reckoned it was larger than any metropolis on Earth had ever been. This city was split into several districts that were then split into grades, and each district was further split into smaller portions based on product type. Jake had gone to the D-grade part of the trade city.

“I have gone to this store many times when Teacher or Lord Thayne asked for me to get alchemy ingredients,” Meira explained as they walked on the street. Jake chose not to comment on her using what many would interpret as a less formal name for Duskleaf by just calling him Teacher compared to calling Jake Lord.

“I will be in your care then,” Jake answered with a smile. It was honestly nice having someone just lead you around when shopping, so he didn’t have to go scouring himself and probably end up getting scammed as Jake had no idea what the hell anything was worth. Not that he doubted he would still come out fine. With the exchange rate of Credits from the ninety-third universe and his already massive amount of funds, calling Jake loaded was an understatement.

While alchemists did tend to be on the wealthier side, they rarely got truly rich as they also spent a lot. Buying materials for experiments that led to no useable products was just a pure money-sink but a necessity to progress in your craft. Jake felt very fortunate he had yet to run into any issues in that department as he just gave Meira however many Credits she needed and didn’t think about it much.

It was a bit weird that Jake had worked in finance before the initiation, but after the system really didn’t care much about money. Perhaps that was a testament to how little he actually cared about his job and life before the system. Sim-Jake hadn’t cared about money either but rather preferred jobs that challenged him, indicating that perhaps this sort of apathy towards money was just natural.

To Jake, money was just a means to an end to allow him to do what he wanted. Maybe he would care more if he actually needed money, but as things were, it was an absolute non-issue, and something was also telling him that he could make a lot of money if he truly needed it. If he became absolutely desperate for funds, he could probably just sell the autograph of the Chosen to some fanatical A-grades or something.

Jake was thrown out of his wayward thoughts on the importance of money as they finally reached the store Meira had wanted them to go to. It was a large building that was beautifully decorated with a very gaudy-looking sign in front depicting a cauldron surrounded by mushrooms and plants with dark green mist coming out of the cauldron. It was even magically animated.

Besides the sign that made Jake question the artistic sense of the creator as the idiot had included mushrooms, the building looked nice. He followed Meira inside, where a female scalekin attendant wearing a suit-like uniform greeted them

“Welcome to the Cauldron’s Dream; how may I be of assistance?” the scalekin asked courteously.

Meira looked at Jake as he answered. “I am on the lookout for Endurance-increasing elixirs and, if possible, some ingredients containing ethtoxins or at least ones useful when creating soul poisons. I also just need some natural treasures related to soul magic in general.”

The ingredients were self-explanatory as Jake really wanted to get better at soul poisons due to their potency, but his desire to buy Endurance elixirs could be questioned. Primarily to ask why he didn’t just craft them himself, and the reason for that was pretty simple: he didn’t want to. He could; it would just take a lot of time, and making elixirs truthfully wasn’t that stimulating for him.

“How many elixirs are you in need of, and will they be for D-grades like yourself or ones of lower grades?” the attendant asked.

“Just for me, and I need enough to add approximately six hundred stat points total,” Jake answered.

“Certainly, I shall have an offer ready in a few minutes. If you would please follow me so we can look at our stock for the soul items. Please do not hesitate to make me know if anything catches your eye and you have further questions,” she said with a smile as she led Jake and Meira into another room. Meira had explained that it was pretty normal that no price was offered right away on products but that there would be a brief waiting period. Jake guessed this was due to variable pricing or maybe just to do some paperwork.

“Is there a specific type of material you are looking for or products of a certain grade?” the attendant asked once they entered a far larger room than before.

“For rarity, I will need uncommon rarity and above, but some rare and above would also be welcome,” Jake answered. “As for if I am looking for anything specific... not really.”

“Very well, let me see what I can do. If desired, I could also ask one of our resident alchemists to assist you in selecting ingredients?”

“No need,” Jake said. Not to be an ass, but he trusted his own senses more when assessing if he wanted ingredients than some resident alchemist.

The attendant simply nodded before motioning for Jake to follow her over to a large tome on a stand. She directed Jake to simply look through their inventory as the pages changed. One page of the open tome depicted an alchemical ingredient with a three-dimensional picture that even gave off a faint aura and scent, while the other page contained written information on the ingredient displayed. As he changed the page, he saw that natural treasure also appeared, and if he wished to, he could open an index.

No matter how many pages he turned, the book didn't change either, making it look like the tome had infinite pages.

Jake was very engrossed in this as he began looking through the different offerings and ended up spending nearly two hours looking before he was done and had decided on what he wanted. The attendant seemed perfectly patient and ended up just chatting with Meira.

The elixirs also came rather quickly, and it was only after Jake was done browsing he got to see them.

[Patientia Elixir (Common)] - An elixir created from a mix of common ingredients, along with a few uncommon ones along with a Beastcore of unknown origin. Allows any who drinks this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Endurance. +5 Endurance upon consumption.

Requirements: D-rank or higher.

It was just as Jake had expected when he was shown the one hundred and twenty bottles. All of them were exactly the same and clearly mass-produced to sell. All Jake saw when he looked at them was saved time and proceeded to make it clear he would buy all one hundred and twenty.

For soul items, he ended up buying way, way more. Way more than he had expected to. The reason why he even wanted these items was that he had a few goals in mind. Firstly he needed some of it for the rituals with Duskleaf, and secondly, he wanted to work on making a certain kind of poison, and for that, he felt like he needed as many different kinds of ingredients as possible. So, yeah, he had chosen to get a lot of ingredients – around a hundred different kinds – with plenty of stock for each of them. Seventy-one were of uncommon rarity, eighteen rare, six epic, and one ancient rarity natural treasure. The ancient rarity one and most of the epic rarity ones were the only items he only got one of each. He had all of this written down on a magical sheet of paper that the big book of browsing “printed” out.

The attendant stared at the final list when Jake showed it to her for quite a bit. She looked up at Jake with puzzlement. “Sir, did you make a mistake? I count over four thousand individual items here...”

“Sounds about right,” Jake nodded.

She looked at him with judging eyes and stared him up and down as if to assess him. “I mean no insult, but before we proceed, I have to be certain you possess the funds for a transaction of this size. The final tally for all these items is... over one-point-two billion Credits.”

Despite saying the number, the attendant seemed shocked, and Jake was also somewhat surprised. Cheaper than he had thought.

One had to remember that Jake left Earth with about four billion Credits after the Treasure Hunt auction. But that was Credits from his universe. After exchanging them for Credits used in other universes – all of which had the exact same going rate – he had, in actuality, about four hundred billion with the 1-100 exchange rate. So to spend a billion or two on alchemical stuff wasn't that big of a deal to him. What else would he spend money on anyway? Get full chapters from [novel•fire•net](http://novel.fire.net)

“Yep, that seems fine,” Jake just said. “Does that include the elixirs?”

“Yes...” the attendant said, taken aback. “Is sir certain?”

“Yeah,” Jake once more confirmed as he proceeded to use the system-feature-thing to show that he indeed had the Credits available.

The attendant did a one-eighty in attitude as all her doubt disappeared, and she displayed a massive grin. “In that case, allow me to process you, sir.”

With the attendant smiling giddily, Jake completed the purchase and got all of the stuff he had wanted. It was delivered in a special spatial storage bag which Jake quickly emptied to put it all in his own inventory as the herbs would do better in there.

Jake and Meira left after that, and Jake failed to hold back a grin as she saw the attendant dancing with joy inside the building behind them. Never had it been more obvious that the store had a commission policy.

“That is all I really came shopping for,” Jake said to Meira on the street outside. “Now it is all you. We need to get you a full set, excluding the spatial necklace, right?”

“Lord Thayne, is it really necessary?” Meira asked nervously.

“Meira, I just spent over a billion Credits while you waited patiently for me to finish. You have worked for me for quite a while now, and I have yet to really give you anything, haven't I? So don't hold back. Even if it is not for fighting, then good equipment can help you with everyday tasks,” Jake said.

“Okay...” Meira relented, having learned that there was no real arguing with Jake once he had made up his mind. Also... while it was faint, Jake did feel a bit of happiness in her voice.

The two of them headed back towards the gateway obelisk they had teleported into the trade city and walked through a gateway leading to another part of the district. After waiting for a few minutes for the queue to clear, that is. Despite having many obelisks and each obelisk having four gateways operating at once, there were still people waiting

simply due to the number of people that came through. To say that the city was buzzing with activity was an understatement and Jake understood why shops absolutely loved being placed there. Even while inside the alchemy shop, he had seen several people come and leave.

After passing through the gateway, they found themselves in a new area and headed towards some shops Jake and Meira had picked out before coming. Meira had asked Izil for advice, and Jake had asked Reika to ask Irin. He had considered contacting Irin personally but had stopped himself as he felt like that would lead to an entire conversation, and he really had just wanted to go shopping.

Anyway, they headed to the shops Irin had suggested first as Jake reckoned she had to know the good spots. Out of everyone Jake knew who was around his own level of power, Irin was the one who had been in the Order for the longest, after all.

Reika had given Jake a list of three from Irin, and it did not take long to find the first one. It was a large red building and was actively having many customers going in and out. Most of them were women, but some had men accompany them.

A women's clothes shop, Jake quickly concluded as he headed inside with Meira. Once inside, Jake saw that it truly was a high-tier establishment and an incubus quickly walked up to greet them when they entered.

"Welcome! You two look like new faces. First time coming here?" the incubus asked in a friendly tone.

"It is," Jake confirmed.

"Were you referred by someone?" he asked, still friendly.

"A succubus friend named Irinixis mentioned the place," Jake said truthfully. Not a referral, but he had learned about it from her, and Jake didn't think she would recommend a place for Reika to visit if there was no way to get in. Oh yeah, that is what Reika had done – asked Irin where she could go if she went with Jake to get some equipment.

"Ah, I see!" the incubus laughed. "Come on in then! What are you two looking for? Something for the gentleman or the lady?"

"Equipment for her," Jake said as he motioned towards Meira. Meira looked pretty nervous and looked around at the high-class entrance hall. Jake himself also scouted the rest of the building with his sphere but found that everything on the second floor was just a distorted mess while everything on the first floor was just a bar of some kind, a few meeting rooms, and overall nothing interesting. The reason why it was distorted was due to the liberal use of space magic to expand all the rooms and save on real estate. It had been the same thing at the alchemy shop.

“I understand,” the incubus said as he looked Meira over before glancing at Jake again. “Just follow me, and I am sure we can find just the right things.”

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Chapter 518: Equipment For Him & Her

Jake had a confession. He had never actually been shopping with a girl before in his life. Well, besides with his mom, but that wasn't really shopping *together* but more going shopping at the same place separately. Even when he had a girlfriend, it had never happened. Perhaps another indicator of how poor that relationship had actually been.

This meant he really didn't know how this sort of thing usually went down. Like, what was he supposed to do? Just follow along? Should he wait outside? As he was utterly clueless, he chose to simply follow the incubus as that guy seemed confident in what customs were. Meira looked as clueless as he as she had likely never actually gone clothes shopping due to her life before coming to the Order, making them both absolute newbies.

The incubus led the two of them into a private room. It was as lavish as every other place Jake had seen in the establishment, but the entire room was a bit off compared to what Jake had expected. It was large and had a few couches, with a mannequin as a centerpiece. That part was semi-normal, but Jake had no idea why the hell there was a king-sized bed in the room. It gave him a bad feeling, but he tried to explain it away. *Probably just doubles as a hotel or something.*

He knew he was just grasping for straws, and his final attempt to deny he had gone somewhere very unplanned was shot down the very next moment.

“Considering it is your first visit, let us start out light,” the incubus said as “clothes” were summoned on the mannequin. He used the words clothes very loosely as there wasn't a lot of it. What was displayed was a mini-dress with a few crucial parts missing, especially in the chest region.

Jake just stared as Meira turned red like a tomato.

“Basic, yet irresistible in its simplicity. This one is a very popular item amongst humans and elves alike, so what say you? If you want to, you are even allowed to test out some of the items we offer in the room provided, but you must buy them if anything gets damaged,” the incubus said with a polite smile.

“...If Lord Thayne wants me to...” Meira said in an almost whispering voice before Jake spoke up.

“Big misunderstanding!” Jake exclaimed. “Huge one. We are not like that at all and came for actual equipment, not... this. You know, things that give stats and stuff and help when something attacks you.”

The incubus seemed taken aback at what Jake said and asked clarifyingly: “You were referred by Irinixis, though? I apologize if there is any confusion, but we deal not in armor but equipment with quite a different use— one I dare claim just as important as combat.”

“Not questioning that, just saying it isn’t what we came looking for,” Jake quickly said. “I apologize for wasting your time.”

“No worries, young man,” the incubus said unbothered. “If you change your mind, you are free to visit once more. Both of you. Now, if you are looking for equipment for the young lady, may I ask what type? What does she specialize in?”

“Healer and alchemist,” Jake answered, happy that the incubus didn’t make a bigger deal out of the awkward situation than he needed to.

“In that case, I can recommend a quaint little store just down the street run by a friend of mine,” the incubus offered as he waved his hand and displayed a magical 3D map.

Jake recognized it instantly as one of the stores Irin had also recommended, making him clarify: “Just to make sure, they just sell normal equipment, right? Gear for the battlefield, you know.”

“They do indeed, though I would once more argue that the battlefield of the bedroom is one often too neglected,” the incubus said semi-jokingly.

Jake didn’t comment on it but just excused himself once more as they left, getting a few light jabs on the way out and stares from other patrons who no doubt made assumptions about the human and elf exiting a private room. Once they were outside on the street, Jake couldn’t help but joke with Meira a bit to relieve the tension. “Well, that was a screw-up. Sorry for that; we’re never going back there, that is for sure.”

“Yeah...” Meira nodded. He felt like she almost seemed disappointed, proof that he still wasn’t that good at reading social cues sometimes. Not paying it any mind, Jake and Meira headed to the second shop. It was a lot smaller than the establishment they had just been in and also had a lot less traffic.

It was small and quaint, with only a single story, and Jake and Meira headed inside right away. It was just as small and homey inside as it was from the outside, and it had fabric

stacked on shelves all around. Jake had been in a few tailor shops in his life, and this one sure fit the bill.

He had already seen the one person in the store through his sphere, and she also noticed him and Meira when they entered. A small dwarf came out of the backroom with a smile a few seconds later and greeted them. “Ah, welcome! What can I do for the lad and lassie?”

Jake briefly scanned her and took note that she was C-grade. Contrary to other dwarves he had met, she was wearing a light dress and was far from as bulky. Still bulky by human standards, but probably considered a stick by dwarf standards.

“I need some equipment,” Meira said. It was something they had talked about while going there – that Meira needed to ask for herself. Jake thought it was awkward to act like he was out shopping with a kid who couldn’t speak for herself on what she wanted. He knew it was because Meira didn’t want to actually decide what to get as Jake was paying, but he hoped he had put those doubts to rest.

“What for?” the tailor asked as she looked Meira up and down. Mostly up, considering the height difference.

“Uhm, everyday stuff and probably some fighting, I think...” Meira said, looking at Jake.

The dwarf nodded as she asked Meira some more basic questions, like what stats she was looking for and what special effects she wanted. Jake just listened in as Meira answered everything and, as subtly as he could, began making his way towards the door. Meira noticed him, and Jake just smiled and gave her a thumbs up before leaving her to do her own shopping. He already had enough awkwardness for one day and wasn’t going to be forced into a changing room or anything like that.

Considering he had some time to kill and was in a shopping area anyway, Jake decided to do some shopping of his own for a bit of gear. He had a few pieces of equipment he had been walking around with for a while and quickly settled on one of his older pieces – gloves.

[Gloves of Quintessential Arcane Manifestation (Epic)] – Gloves made from a powerful synthetic cloth. These gloves are incredibly thin, nearly unnoticeable, and are incredibly resilient against all attacks. Will become immensely more durable if infused with arcane energy. The Crystallized Essence has been fully integrated. All constructs using your arcane affinity and your hands will last longer and be more potent. The gloves can store a large amount of arcane energy that can be released immediately. Channeling unattuned energy into these gloves will grant it your arcane affinity. Enchantments: +125 Intelligence, +75 Wisdom, +50 Willpower. Quintessential Arcane Manifestation.

Requirements: lvl 115+ in any humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound

They were good. Arnold had gone above and beyond when he made them, but frankly, their effect just didn't cut it anymore for the most part. The blast he could shoot out of them was pretty much the same as what he could do by himself, and the only true value was how durable they were when he infused them with arcane energy. There was also the part about arcane constructs made with his hand becoming stronger, but as with most things in the system, that was all relative. When he got them, it was noticeable, but now that he was several times stronger, it was utterly irrelevant. In ten or more levels, borderline none of the effects would do anything besides the stats.

So, Jake decided to check out a shop he himself had been looking at before they went. He had said that the Order did not run any stores themselves, but that did not mean members of the Order didn't run their own stores and that members didn't tend to have the biggest ones.

Jake headed for one of these shops that he knew were run directly by talented members of the Order. It was new and had a pretty special requirement for those who were allowed to shop there – you had to be blessed either by the Malefic Viper or a god subordinate to him. He feared that he was walking into a madhouse of fanatics, but he also knew they had good stuff in there. Draskil had even mentioned it once during their dungeon run and said he got a legendary item from there.

Before he left Meira alone, he had placed a Mark of the Avaricious Hunter on her. He had zero confidence in finding her without it.

After going through another gate and walking down a large street even more filled than those before, he saw the building he was looking for. It wasn't hard, considering it was a massive castle-like building with the motif of the Order of the Malefic Viper proudly displayed right above the entrance. A massive tower shot up from the center of the castle, too, making it a landmark. Quite impressive considering the building had only been around for about a year.

Not many people went there, but all who did were stared at when allowed entrance. With a sigh, Jake headed for the castle, and once he got close to the entrance, he felt a faint pulse scanning him. He was not blocked and simply walked through the entrance to enter a large hall. The moment he stepped inside, he felt many presences all around him, not from people but from the statues lining the hall on each side depicting different gods. At the end of the hall stood the statue of the Malefic Viper. It depicted a massive simple-looking black snake coiled up and faced towards whoever dared enter the castle.

Well, if this isn't a way to try and humble anyone who enters, I don't know what it is, Jake thought, getting flashbacks to the lesson with Viridia and the statue of Villy there. As usual, Jake didn't care about the presences but quickly still understood what was happening. He chose to walk slowly through the hall before reaching a new gate and entering, trying to at least look a little worn out from the endeavor.

Only after going through the gate could he see the new area due to how spatially expanded it had been. And oh boy, was it expanded. Jake entered an utterly massive curving tunnel of sorts, extending what seemed like infinitely upwards. He also felt that his Mark on Meira felt far further away than before, way, way, further.

“Greetings, Blessed by the Malefic One,” a voice said as a figure teleported in. Jake instantly felt the pressure and knew this individual was a fully-fledged B-grade. The person wore a hooded robe with the insignia of the Order on it, but nothing else was visible, not even their race.

“Hello there,” Jake said in return with a nod.

“What has the young master come looking for?” the hooded attendant asked. Jake had studied a little and knew this place was quite unique, and Draskil had also said that the ones running it were high rollers of the Order.

“Equipment, preferably gloves. Also, if there are any items capable of awakening Records within an item to further enhance them, that would also be supremely useful,” Jake said. While Jake had come looking for new gloves, he wouldn’t say no to also finding a way to upgrade his boots.

“The second request may be hard to fulfill as such items are rarely found in D-grade,” the B-grade said. “But for the gloves, we have plenty on offer. Please, do tell, what kind do you need? And do you walk the Path of the Malefic One, having embraced the Legacy?”

Jake wasn’t sure why the second question mattered but answered both. “I do possess the Legacy skills, and I need gloves primarily to help boost my physical stats, and if they are highly durable, it would be the best.”

The attendant nodded and spoke: “Please follow me.”

Using a few hand motions, a portal appeared right beside the B-grade, and the person motioned for Jake to step through. Jake felt no danger or like anything was amiss and did so as he found himself inside a far smaller area reminiscent of a trophy room. There were pedestals all over with items on display, all of them behind barriers a bit like what the vampires had used to preserve their items. It was the kind of barrier that helped items not lose their enchantments and power.

Jake could not even Identify any of the items due to these barriers. It wasn’t that he couldn’t properly see or sense them, but that the barriers themselves messed with whatever Identify did. Rather than getting full information, it only gave a brief snippet.

After using Identify on a few of the pedestals, all of them holding pairs of gloves, Jake got the gist of it.

[Gloves – Ancient - Medium Armor – Magical – Pride of the Malefic Viper – Requirements Not Met]

[Gloves – Legendary - Medium Armor – Magical – Touch of the Malefic Viper]

“Do note that the young master may only purchase a single item,” the attendant said. Jake was about to ask why but quickly understood. Resale value. But he was a bit confused about the descriptions provided still.

“Can you explain what the information given means?” Jake asked.

“The first three, I believe self-explanatory, while the fourth says if the gloves give physical or magical stats, with the final one displaying which Legacy skill the item is tied to. Do note that in order to use the gloves, you need the Legacy skill at the same rarity as the gloves. If none here are useable, we can visit a lower floor. Do note that if you do not possess the required level to wear any item, your Identify should reflect that,” the attendant explained.

Jake nodded once more in recognition. Made sense. He looked at a few more items before one truly caught his eyes.

[Gloves – Legendary - Medium Armor – Physical – Scales of the Malefic Viper]

They were all black gloves and looked incredibly light despite being classified as medium armor. Thin black scales covered the item, looking almost just like a pattern on the leather. Jake liked how they looked, and the description made him very hopeful it would do just what he wanted. It gave him good vibes.

“That one,” Jake said as he pointed to the gloves.

“First, I must make sure the young master has the funds. Each legendary item here is priced at a billion Credits. Also, be aware that once the item is revealed, you must either purchase it or leave with nothing,” the attendant said. Fresh chapters posted on *novel●fire●net*

Jake quickly displayed that he had the funds and didn't see any scenario where he wouldn't buy the gloves for a measly billion Credits. With a nod, the attendant took out a token. The barrier shimmered away, allowing Jake to finally properly Identify the item.

[Gloves of the Malefic One's Grace (Legendary)] – By the grace of the Malefic One, your scales shall be your instrument of invincibility. Created by an incredibly skilled crafter possessing the Blessing of the Malefic Viper, these gloves contain but a fragment of the Primordial's Records. Made from the hide and scales of an apex wyvern, infused with its toxic blood, and enhanced by a powerful, refined core, these gloves are incredibly resilient. Allows Scales of the Malefic Viper to be cast directly upon the gloves at a significantly increased

effect. While using Scales of the Malefic Viper, the effect of all stat points granted by these gloves are increased by a significant amount. Only one who has shown sufficient proficiency in Scales of the Malefic Viper may wear these gloves.

Enchantments: +300 Toughness, +300 Vitality, +300 Strength, +300 Agility, +300 Endurance. Scaled Hands of the Malefic One

Requirements: lvl 175+ in any humanoid race. Skill: Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary+).

While Jake did have a limited understanding of how much things were worth, he did know that legendary items were always priced in the billions within the multiverse. The Auction had allowed everyone on Earth to get banger deals on stuff, but this offering was at the same level in pure value. One billion was a steal.

“Satisfied?” the attendant asked.

“Very,” Jake smiled. “But is it truly only priced at a billion? This may be presumptuous of me, but the materials alone must have cost more than that severalfold.”

A part of him even wondered if maybe the item was cursed or something, but the attendant explained:

“These items have a limited userbase, and it is not in our interest to keep them vaulted up. They are for those who have been recognized by the Malefic One or those loyal to his excellency, and it is only in our interest to help them on their way. For you to already have achieved legendary rarity in Scales of the Malefic Viper despite being in D-grade is incredibly commendable already and proves you are worthy. So yes, they are underpriced by the standards of many but priced exactly right by our standards. This place was never made to make money to begin with.”

Jake nodded in understanding, not one to say no to a good thing. “Well, I am for sure buying them.”

The attendant nodded and bowed. “May they serve you well, he who is blessed by the Malefic One.”

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Chapter 519: Something Wrong

Meira was nervous after Lord Thayne left her alone. She had been shopping many times before, but never for herself. Wasn't it just a waste of money to get her equipment? Currently, she only got a bit of Wisdom from her spatial necklace, with the rest of her items not even counting as equipment. Receiving that necklace had already been far more than Meira would expect, but at least she saw the usefulness in that. It allowed her to more effectively transport materials for Lord Thayne as it even had a storage specifically enchanted to store alchemical ingredients.

"Follow me, lassie; let's get you sorted," the shop owner said as she hurried Meira into the back room. Meira just followed along with the far smaller woman, still not sure if all of this was a good idea.

"Relax there," the dwarf said with a calming smile. "Young masters like that like to treat their girlfriends nicely, so you better take advantage while you can."

"I... he doesn't think of me like that," Meira denied, embarrassed. He had made that clear when they had gone to that other shop. She was mad at herself for thinking that Lord Thayne had taken her there with those kinds of intentions. Nearly as mad as she was for feeling dejected that he hadn't.

"Really?" the dwarf asked. "Well, color me surprised. Either way, he gave me the heebie-jeebies, so there is no way he is average, and people who aren't average got money to treat those they care about. And he does care about you. Any damn idiot can see that. So stop dilly-dallying, and let's get you a proper set, alright?"

Meira looked at the dwarf for a moment, considering her words. It was true that Lord Thayne didn't think of her "that way," but it was also true he had always been very nice to her, so maybe he did care? Just in another way? And if he did that, it should be fine to get some equipment if he asked her, right?

"Okay," Meira said with a smile as the dwarf got to work, and the two discussed what kind of equipment would suit Meira best. They spent a good while going over everything, and the dwarf even showed her different pieces of jewelry she had in stock that would go well with what Meira needed. It was all a bit overwhelming as many of the items were probably more expensive than Meira would have been if the Order had just decided to just sell her to someone over giving her to Lord Thayne.

Yet it also felt oddly liberating – a feeling she thought she would never feel – to be there alone. Buying things for herself. She hoped to make Lord Thayne proud and to want to keep her around, which was the primary reason she worked so hard. But after the entire incident with Nella and Utmal, she had been thinking if maybe it was okay if she did some more things for herself? Izil also tried to convince her she should be more selfish, or at least not as selfless.

Maybe she could begin to get stronger for herself? If Lord Thayne wanted her to no longer be his slave but instead be a full member of the Order by her own merits, she

would need to be more independent. She would need to make her own choices and be a member because she wanted to. But she was afraid that becoming a member would mean that Lord Thayne would have her leave. Have her get her own residence or enter the dorms or something. Meira desperately didn't want that to happen, so she would have to selfishly find a way to make Lord Thayne want to keep her around even after she was no longer bound by a slave contract.

She wanted to stay no matter what she had to do to make that happen. It was selfish of her to want more from him than what he had already given and promised to give her... but he did want her to make her own choices and do what she wanted. And what Meira wanted more than anything was to stay, so this selfish wish of hers was okay... right?

--

Jake walked out of the castle-like building wearing his new cool gloves. On the way out, he had already done a bit of experimenting and found that they were actually very similar to his old gloves. He could instinctively use Scales of the Malefic Viper only on the gloves, and he instantly felt the scales already sewn into the gloves be filled with energy and strengthened to an insane level. The gloves stayed flexible like before, but he felt like his hands had become near-impenetrable. Of course, any blunt force would still hurt like hell, and if he tried to block a sword, he would find his fingers broken, but for anything magical, it would be insane. He could also use it to grab sharp edges and whatnot, as he had already done with his old gloves.

The stat effect was also interesting. Whenever Jake used Scales of the Malefic Viper, he felt a slight increase in power based on how big a part of his body he covered. It was super small when he used it only in local areas, but Jake reckoned that if his entire body was covered, he would get what would amount to roughly 100 more in each of the five stats the armor gave. It was small, but there, and frankly, the biggest thing about the gloves was the insane amount of stats they offered to begin with, along with their sheer level of durability when Scales were used.

He considered if making an entire set of armor like the gloves would be a good idea but discovered that maybe it wasn't the best as the mana drain when he infused the gloves was rather intense. A full set of armor would be able to drain dry even Jake and his anomalously large mana pool at an alarming speed.

Feeling good about himself, Jake saw no need to delay as he headed back towards the shop Meira was in. His Mark worked as a guide after he went through the teleportation gate to the same area she was in, allowing him to quickly make it there. She was still inside the shop, and Jake decided to wait outside until she was done.

He leaned against the wall of the building and closed his eyes as his mind sank into his soul. Once inside, he was met with the sight of an almost exact copy of himself who was, for some reason, repeatedly hitting the ground as dark pulses of energy were released from him, blasting him into the air.

Sim-Jake had changed to look even more like Jake than before. Looking at him felt a bit weird to the real Jake as he knew his other version was slowly disappearing. His personality had become more and more like Jake's own over the last few months. It had already been similar, but now they barely talked anymore as there was no need to. They now only discussed two things: melee combat and Shadow Vault. And melee combat had become less and less as of late as Jake quickly picked up on sim-Jake's teachings the more assimilated he became.

Jake looked at his simulacrum, who was naturally aware he was there. His other version stopped his practice and turned to Jake. "Don't look glum like I am dying or something; we both knew this was the ideal outcome."

"Still," Jake sighed.

"It is what it is," sim-Jake shrugged. The next moment a katar appeared in both of his hands, and Jake mimicked his motion as they charged each other. Their weapons clashed as if mirrored with two katar tips perfectly impacting each other, sending both of them stumbling back.

Sim-Jake moved faster for the follow-up, but Jake was ready as he countered, getting the upper hand. He managed to land a minor wound but was pushed in return when he tried to capitalize on the one hit he got in.

Their fight continued for about twenty minutes, with both of them slowly taking damage. It looked very even until Jake made a minor slip-up and was cornered. He had slowly been losing ground, and after a combo more than a hundred hits long had found himself unable to respond before a katar penetrated his skull.

"Fuck," Jake muttered, thinking he was gonna win this one. Both their wounds had also already healed. They weren't real wounds anyway.

"Still improving," sim-Jake smiled.

True, Jake thought as the simulacrum turned around and continued whatever he was doing before. Jake had no idea what it was doing but knew that the simulacrum focused nearly one hundred percent of its time on Vault now. He had to, as his memories of the simulated world were slowly fading, and continuing to improve the fighting style was now meaningless. Now all he had to do was pass down the final pieces before fully handing the mantle to Jake.

He stayed a bit longer to look at his simulacrum, genuinely having no idea what he was doing. It was like all the Records pertaining to Shadow Vault had been integrated into sim-Jake for him to perfect. It was to the level of the real version of Jake feeling unsure about even using the skill. He got the sense that he was lacking some of the instinctual knowledge the skill gave about how to use it but naturally couldn't know what he didn't know. However, what he was sure of was that the day sim-Jake ceased to be would be

the day his Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra upgraded, and in the same way, then the day Shadow Vault upgraded, sim-Jake would lose his remaining basis of existence that kept him separate from Jake.

“Keep up the good work,” Jake muttered with a sigh before he left his Soulspace, having felt Meira and the dwarf exit the back room within the store.

Jake opened his eyes and went inside the store just in time. He saw Meira carrying a whole bunch of things, all placed in separate boxes. They also saw him enter the store as Meira looked somewhat nervous. “Lord Thayne! Please inspect the items and let me know if these are acceptable.”

“You are the one shopping here, not me. Whatever you picked is fine as long as you didn’t get a full set of legendary gear in an attempt to bankrupt me,” Jake joked.

“I would never do that!” Meira semi-yelled with indignation before finally realizing it was a joke, making her blush in embarrassment. She clenched one of the boxes and asked in a nearly whispering voice: “Please look at them a little, please?”

Jake resigned himself and nodded. Meira took out a white dress from one of the boxes and proudly showed it off. It didn’t look that much different from the usual dress she wore, at least not in design, but the item was clearly far superior. Identifying it, he actually felt a little proud of her.

[Sorcerer’s Dress of Merciful Intent (Epic)] – A dress crafted from the silk of a juvenile Ethspawn Spider, further enhanced by a talented crafter. Grants impressive resistance to most magical attacks and dissipates a portion of the physical force of all blows made against the wearer. Passively absorbs a portion of all attacks, be they magical or physical in nature. This energy can then be infused into a healing spell to empower it. Enchantments: +250 Wisdom, +100 Intelligence, +100 Willpower. Merciful Intent.

Requirements: lvl 140+ in any humanoid race.

He had to admit that when he had left Meira alone to shop, he had feared he would have returned to her having selected a full set of common rarity equipment with a few inferior rarity items mixed in. Jake was happy to see she had selected equipment of proper value. It wasn’t overly extravagant either. One had to remember that Meira was not a monster like Jake and needed far fewer stats than he did from his equipment. In many ways, then a full epic set of gear would be just as good for her as a full legendary set. Sure, the legendary gear would be better overall and have better special effects, but the difference wasn’t massive, and there was also the fear of making Meira a target if she had too good stuff.

“Looking good,” Jake approved with a thumbs up.

“Should get the little lassie all settled for a good while,” the dwarf said with a smile. “Gives above her total stat limit, leaving some room for her to grow into. The rings are both purely defensive, too, so don’t worry about her getting targeted as a healer. They will all find themselves dead before getting to kill her. And if all else goes wrong, the earrings have an enchantment to automatically teleport a distance away if she is in mortal danger. Limited uses with recharge time, but a real lifesaver.”

Jake nodded and thanked the shopkeeper. He did not doubt she had done her job to try and convince Meira to get better stuff. Okay, sure, it was her actual job to make Meira spend as much as possible, and it was a bit weird for Jake to be grateful to her for making him spend more, but such was life. Google search novel*fire*net

“How much for everything?” Jake asked.

“Full set of epic armor, an ancient ring, epic ring, and a set of ancient rarity linked earrings with emergency-teleportation ability... comes down to roughly one-point-nine billion Credits for the entire thing. If we cut the most expensive item in the earrings, it will only be-“

“Nah, it’s good; we’ll take it,” Jake smiled as he paid the shopkeeper. The dwarf looked a bit surprised at how fast he had just paid without any comments. Not that Jake thought much about it. He had spent nearly that much on alchemy items earlier that day, and this was a full set for Meira that she could use for a long time. Totally worth it.

He saw the shopkeeper lean in and whisper something to Meira Jake couldn’t hear as the C-grade dwarf hid it. Meira turned entirely red in her face before quickly backing away, making Jake wonder what the dwarf had said, but looking at Meira, she didn’t look like she had any intentions of sharing. She didn’t even dare look at him for some reason.

“Thanks for your patronage,” the dwarf said with a big smile. “And do come again. I love big spenders.”

Jake chuckled a bit at the shamelessness as he said his goodbyes and headed out of the shop. Meira put all of the boxes in her spatial storage, intending to take them on once they got home. Something they did right away as neither of them had any more business in the city for now.

The two of them headed back to one of the gateway pillars and teleported straight home to the mansion. Jake went to the living room as Meira went off to her personal residence to change into her new clothes. That was also when Jake learned that Meira had never learned how to rapidly use a spatial storage to switch equipment or even equip a weapon. He should definitely teach her that.

With some time to spare, Jake took inventory and began making some plans for his next period of crafting with all of these new materials. He also now had ingredients for

some ritual stuff with Duskleaf, and he was ready to begin the initial parts of the ritual for the Pollendust Bee Queen. There would be several stages to the ritual, and this first part was pretty much just about filling the creature with energy and Records to further build upon.

After thinking about his plans for a while, Meira returned to the main house. Jake saw her in his sphere long before she reached the living room, but he was still taken aback when he saw her with his eyes. She wore the white dress she had shown him along with the jewelry he had been told about. Before, she had only been wearing her simple clothes, but now she truly looked like a young elven mistress from an influential clan.

“Does it look okay?” Meira asked shyly.

“Yeah, you look great,” Jake smiled as he gave her not one but two thumbs-ups, only making her blush more. It was clear she wasn’t used to compliments from her reaction, and Jake had to admit it was kind of cute.

Nonetheless, Meira seemed happy. Jake was just happy she was happy, and the two of them once more dove into their routine of alchemy and practice. Everything was going smoothly, and Jake felt relaxed during this time until one day... something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

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

Chapter 520: In An Instant

Jake had spent another month rapidly progressing since his shopping trip. The most monumental event was when Jake finally laid down the ritual circle framework for the Pollendust Bee Queen. He had prepared enough cores, and with some of the materials he had bought, could begin the initial stages.

It was a bit like how Mystie had used her ritual for a long time before Jake came along. Jake would do something similar but at an even higher level. The ritual circle itself was about ten meters in radius and was placed on his lawn, surrounded by a barrier he cheated to get made by just having Duskleaf erect it. This initial stage would last quite a while and was likely going to be the longest.

Besides the ritual, Jake had just been slamming out potions and had been working on a special kind of soul poison he really wanted to make. It was harder than he had thought it would be, but he still felt he was getting closer to his goal.

With this also came some levels. It felt like they had been coming even faster than before recently, and Jake theorized it was due to how expensive the materials he experimented with were. Again, he didn't know; all he knew was that three levels in a month was pretty damn good.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 181 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 182 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 177 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 183 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

One other thing Jake had also done during this time was a lot of heavy drinking. Only a bit of it had been alcohol, with the majority being Endurance-increasing elixirs. And damn, had it paid off.

Status

Health Points (HP): 54011/54050

Mana Points (MP): 95231/100484

Stamina: 47021/48320

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His stamina had increased by more than ten thousand points since he went shopping, the main contributor being 555 stats gained from elixirs, maxing out his current limit for his levels when it came to consuming them. This was before percentage bonuses, so he had to add another 45% to that. All in all, good stuff. As for his free points... Jake had been weak and, in a moment of indulgence, tossed all the 175 stat points he had saved up into Perception.

He had no regrets.

Yet even after all of these things had gone so well and Jake felt like everything was going great, he felt uneasy that day. It was a terrible feeling he could not pinpoint; he just knew something was wrong. Off. Jake felt restless and couldn't focus as he asked Villy, who didn't provide any useful answer. He then turned to Miranda to ask her how things were on Earth and was told nothing was amiss.

Next up was Sylphie, and while they couldn't exactly speak, she also wasn't worried. Sylphie was still hanging around with Carmen too, so it shouldn't have anything to do with her either. Jake then checked everyone in the Order he knew but just got confused responses. Nothing was wrong anywhere... yet Jake felt as he felt. Something was horribly wrong, and it frustrated him to not know what the issue was.

And for every moment, that feeling of wrongness was building.

Miranda felt flustered after Jake had contacted her for the second time that day to tell her that something was wrong. He gave no details or even an idea of what the issue was; he just said something was wrong. Miranda had gotten to work and checked in on everyone, having even contacted Caleb, Jake's brother, to make sure things were calm. He said nothing was wrong. Same for Casper and the Risen.

The Noboru Clan also didn't have any issues. She was well and truly lost and considered if perhaps she had to go to the Holy Church and the Augur to try and figure out if there truly were any problems. She even went as far as to check where the two hawks, Mystie and Hawkie, were, but they were still in the forest. If they were in danger, then Miranda had no idea what to do anyway.

In all honesty, then Miranda was worried about Jake. What if something had happened to him that caused some kind of mental disturbance? That didn't seem to be an issue, though, as he was perfectly lucid. Lucid... but troubled and worried.

She kept trying to find the problem and did recall Lillian, Hank, Hank's children, and most people she and Jake both knew. He had said that his feeling of wrongness was likely connected to someone he knew being in danger, but that was it. All she could do was take precautionary actions.

Miranda was still researching and trying to find out what was wrong as suddenly the ground shook. *Are we under attack?*

Without any hesitation, Miranda activated one of her skills to get the status of the city and saw only one place with a disturbance. The teleportation building connecting Haven and the fort had been utterly destroyed. Even the usually well-protected one at the Fort was now nothing more than rubble.

She instantly teleported down to her ritual chamber to prepare for an attack as several tokens in her inventory vibrated. With bated breath, she checked them and saw the same message from everywhere.

"Under attack-"

"Teleportation circles-"

"Cut off-"

The Noboru Clan, Court of Shadows, Valhal, Risen, and even the Holy Church.

Miranda scrambled to understand the situation and quickly realized one thing: in an instant, the entire teleportation network of the planet had been destroyed.

An hour earlier.

Sometimes, one must choose a lesser evil.

Arthur checked his watch and saw it was time. The researchers and space mages had been hard at work for the better part of a year, and finally, their hard work would be realized.

“Activate the circle,” Arthur said.

The more than a dozen space mages complied as they got into position. Soon, the circle began pulsing with power, a cube in the center functioning as the anchor to connect two very far-off places. The cube had been given to him during the Myriad Choices event for this exact purpose. The magic circle would only be active for a few seconds... but it was enough.

Eighteen figures appeared, and a second after, the entire underground chamber shook as cracks formed all over. The mages who had helped perform the ritual all fell unconscious to the ground as healers rushed in to take them out. The formation was well and truly broken too, but it had done what it was supposed to.

“We meet again, Arthur,” the man – if he even was that – leading the entourage of new arrivals said. His orange skin made it clear he was not human, and neither were any of his comrades. Arthur knew every single figure that had just appeared could singlehandedly battle the strongest party that the United Cities Alliance possessed. But such a force was necessary, especially their leader and the odd shifting elemental-like being of ash. Both of them were figures he knew few could rival.

“Welcome to Earth, Celestial Child,” Arthur bowed, using the title he had been informed the alien named Ell’Hakan went by.

“A single sun and a singular, powerful moon,” Ell’Hakan smiled as he looked up, his gaze seeming to pierce the several hundred meters of soil above them to gaze at the sky. “I thank you for your welcome, and I believe all preparations are in place?”

“We have held up our part of the bargain,” Arthur nodded. “By the end of the hour, everyone will need to be in position, so we must not delay.”

“Naturally,” the alien man nodded with a smile as Arthur led him to the chambers above.

A hard decision had to be made, and Arthur had simply seen no other path than the one chosen. A cancer had invaded their planet in the form of divine fanaticism. And like cancer, these organizations would fight each other to eventually leave the body they inhabited dead, broken, or mutated beyond recognition. So he had chosen to battle this cancer by introducing a metaphorical chemo-therapy – a harmful method that he at least had a semblance of control over. One he hoped would give their planet a new life.

Once they reached the chamber above, Ell'Hakan turned to three of his followers. "Go."

The three of them nodded as they all teleported away. Space mages, all three of them.

"What do you intend for them to do?" Arthur asked.

"Something for the future. Only a fool doesn't plan for tomorrow," Ell'Hakan said with a comforting smile. "Do not worry. I will keep my promise, and their task is of no consequence to our plan. Once our business concludes, and if we are successful, you shall have this world, just as the contract dictates."

Arthur nodded, feeling assured. "Very Well. The Disciple should arrive soon."

As if he had predicted the future, a young man walked into the room. Arthur once more felt pressured as he knew this person was at the very peak of D-grade already. Just a single step away from his evolution and a vital piece in their strategy.

"Greetings, Disciple of Eversmile," Ell'Hakan greeted the young man with a bow. "Have you made the preparations? Assembled them all?"

"They are ready," the young man named William simply said as he looked at the being of ash. "I take it you will be the one to lead them?"

"Such is the arrangement. Lead me to them, human," the rumbling voice of the Unique Lifeform said.

The more time passed, the more assured Arthur felt. Despite not a single one of them being in C-grade, they had a chance. But the Chosen was powerful, and so was this Fallen King. There were also many other factions...

Ell'Hakan noticed Arthur's doubt and comforted him. "As long as you do your part, so will we do ours. Remember who stands before you. Now... let us begin our story of conquest and liberation."

Miyamoto sat in meditation within his chambers. The wind was blowing hard as the flowers swayed, the world itself in contrast to his inner calm. He had been contacted earlier by Ms. Wells of Haven and informed that Jake believed something was wrong.

The Sword Saint would not disregard the hunter's judgment and was prepared.

He opened his eyes as the ground rumbled. Yells went through the entire compound, and the city of Saya was in chaos as the security forces moved to find those responsible or identify their city's attacker. All he heard in the distance was that the teleporters were all destroyed. Miyamoto slowly stood up and sighed.

"Who are you people?" he spoke as two figures appeared. Both with orange skin. He frowned as he felt their power. *These people... stronger than the Judge of the Court.*

"We come at the behest of the United Cities Alliance as well as our lord, the Celestial Child, Ell'Hakan. By his grace, we offer you the opportunity to surrender and to join us in our quest to purge this world of divine influence," one of them said.

Miyamoto frowned. "What does this purging consist of?"

"The death or escape of all those who serve their gods as puppets," the other one of his two visitors answered. "We do not care for those blessed by gods with no alliances or factions, such as the Primordial you call your Patron."

"You are starting a war," Miyamoto said, his frown deepening. "One that neither Noboru Clan nor I will take any part in."

"Very well," the first person spoke again. "It shall be told you died with honor."

Miyamoto drew his blade as the two were upon him, and in an instant, he was blasted out of his personal compound, flying through the air and out of the city. He landed in the plains outside the city as the two figures appeared to his sides

The Sword Saint got into a defensive position as the two charged again, the old man ready this time.

Caleb had instantly put the true Skyggen in full lockdown after Miranda contacted him. A choice that would prove incredibly wise as not long after the attack arrived. The fake Skyggen had its teleportation arrays all blown up in an instant, and even the secret circles set up by the Court were destroyed.

He moved quickly as he evacuated his parents, wife, and child to a shelter, and just in time, too, as he got reports of incoming attackers. Yet they did not move to actually attack but had simply stationed themselves outside.

As the Judge of the Court of Shadows, Caleb was usually informed about something like this happening... but he had been taken by surprise, and from the sheer level of coordination, this was not some minor attack. They had simultaneously struck nearly every settlement and every single faction at once. He had no idea what these people were planning, but he soon got an idea as more and more intel arrived.

It was a full-on attempt at a planetary takeover.

All over the part of the planet inhabited by humans, similar scenes took place. Armies appeared in cities out of nowhere as residents showed their true colors. The United Cities Alliance had long been considered the largest singular faction and was now showing it. In many places, they simply caused civil unrest. Others went and directly attacked the local City Lord to take control, effectively expanding the scope of the alliance

In the cities that were too powerful or with a populace that could not be infiltrated, far more common forms of warfare were deployed as each city was cut off. Many City Lords that had simply allied with a religious group surrendered immediately once under pressure as they had no way to get swift reinforcements and feared for their lives.

Within less than half an hour, the once well-connected planet with a sprawling teleportation network was turned into a planet of isolated islands with vast distances between each of them.

“Earth under attack, teleportation network down planet-wide, Sword Saint MIA, Caleb isolated, and yet to establish any contact with other cities,” Jake heard from Miranda as his feeling of wrongness was at an apex. The message almost gave him relief as finally, he knew what had caused it.

There was not a hint of hesitation as Jake went to the teleporter in his residence. The moment he reached it, he tried to activate it but felt like the connection was slightly unstable.

“Villy, something is wrong with the teleporter. Can I still use it?” Jake asked with slight panic.

“It will take you to Earth if that is what you ask. It will even take you to your city,” the god answered promptly. As if he had been waiting.

“What is happening on Earth?” Jake asked, knowing the god knew.

“Jake, there are things mortals and gods have to deal with. This is not something that involves me. But... good luck, I believe in you, do your best,” Villy said as he cut off the connection, leaving Jake frowning even more than before. Villy seemed almost worried? But he did understand the part about this not being an issue for the god to deal with. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY *novel.fire.net*

Without hesitation, he activated the teleporter and was sent through the void. The journey was thankfully uneventful as Jake touched down right in front of the monument erected to allow his teleportation and-

BOOM!

Right behind him, the monument exploded. Debris and rock flew around his ears as he took in everything his sphere saw. Flying pieces of the broken monument, soil and dust spewed up from everywhere, and red flames soared up into the sky from the attack that had broken the installation.

Jake turned his head almost robotically as he saw three figures land amongst the rubble of his now cut-off way off Earth. He stared at what the man in the front was holding as that something was thrown toward him. It landed a few meters in front of Jake and rolled on the ground as he stared down at the lifeless eyes of the monument's creator's severed head. Chris' head.

"Welcome home, Chosen of the Malefic Viper," a familiar voice said as Jake looked up and saw the Chosen of Yip of Yore – Ell'Hakan.

"I did tell you we would meet sooner than you expected," he spoke in a calm tone. "My condolences for the builder; he was useful while it-"

Jake didn't give the man a chance to speak as he charged. A few hours ago, he had been doing alchemy in peace. Everything had happened so fast, and Jake barely had time to properly register what was going on. But... he didn't need to.

His eyes burned with pure anger as a katar appeared in each hand. Arcane Awakening activated at full power immediately as there was no hesitation or doubt.

He was going to kill every single one of them.

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

Chapter 521: Celestial Alignment of Yore

Jake had not really known Chris that well. He was just a guy Jake had saved by coincidence when he killed Abby and her father after they attacked Haven. Later on, he had then given the young man a Blessing from the Viper, and Chris made the monument to allow Jake to teleport out of their universe. To call him a friend wouldn't be entirely correct... but he was Jake's guy. He had worked for Jake. He had only been targeted because of Jake.

So Jake would get revenge for him.

Ell'Hakan was ready for Jake's attack despite how instant it had been. So were his two followers as both of them exploded with power, activating their boosting skills while

moving to intercept. One of them had a sword and a shield, with the other one a healer based on the magic she deployed.

Jake didn't care about these two but headed straight for Ell'Hakan. He teleported past the warrior and met a barrier from the healer as Ell'Hakan took out a staff and slammed it into the ground. A wave of red flames hit Jake, but black scales already covered his body as he, with a single hit, shattered the barrier. But before he would land a blow, he was attacked from behind by the warrior.

Fuck you, Jake just thought as he completely ignored the blow and kept up his assault. He stabbed forward and managed to scratch his opponent before the orange fuck turned into flames and flew backward at a rapid speed. In return, Jake got an annoying cut across his back before he spun and kicked the shield of the warrior, blasting him away.

Charging again, he chased after Ell'Hakan with reckless abandon. Spears of flames flew towards him, but Jake once more ignored it as dodging would only slow him down. The only thing that mattered was killing the person in front of him.

Yet the fuck kept fleeing, and the warrior and healer kept getting in his damn way. For every second, his anger grew. Like a volcano constantly at the edge of an eruption, the heat was just building up. He ignored everything that would not lead directly to damaging Ell'Hakan as nothing else would give him the slightest reprieve.

The damn healer made his life difficult as even when he stabbed the warrior several times, he just got up again, and Ell'Hakan was constantly just turning into fucking flames to run away. What was worse was the constant taunting. Jake did not truly register the words; he just knew they were taunts.

His vision turned red as he felt on the edge of eruption. His inability to simply kill his opponent only angered him even more. At this point, nothing else mattered.

His body pulsed with power as he prepared to push himself further. He was about to increase Arcane Awakening above 60% as suddenly a feeling of danger emerged from within. As if cold water was thrown in his face, Jake suddenly felt a bit of clarity. In the middle of a chase, he closed his eyes.

He is controlling your emotions, you fucking idiot, he told himself as he experienced a moment of clarity.

Jake remembered what his opponent could do. His emotions were still out of control and flaring up. He felt angrier than he likely ever had... but from the anger came an odd sense of calm once he realized why he was mad. Jake opened his eyes again and locked gazes with the Nahoom in front of him.

Seeing he had stopped, Ell'hakan also got a break. "The wild beast has calmed. Once more, you show unique restraint. Though I must confess, I expected more than a charging, mindless-

"What do you hope to accomplish with this shit?" Jake asked, genuinely unsure. Why the hell would he bother invading their planet in the first place?

"We each walk our Paths. While you might be a hunter, I am not. In this instance, I am only here to work as a liberator. Did your world not like this sort of thing? Foreign countries invading others at the behest of freedom fighters merely to exploit the land? War under false pretenses for personal gain? That is all I am here to do. To free this world from you. At least, that is the story that is told. Truth is subjective, and all that matters is what one can make others believe," Ell'Hakan said, more talkative than Jake would expect. The problem was that he was just talking, nothing else.

"You didn't answer shit," Jake spat out.

"Fine, I shall give you one hint," Ell'Hakan smiled. "Third World Congress."

Jake wasn't sure what the guy meant until his eyes opened wide. Was this fuck trying to get voted World Leader by placing his own City Lords or something? Was that even possible? And did it matter? No... because he would die there today.

His katars disappeared as he equipped his bow and took out a poison bottle he quickly tossed in his quiver, having learned to soak the arrows within a long time ago. The warrior and healer were behind him, ready to engage. Jake marked all three of his targets as he took a deep breath and looked at Ell'Hakan. "You are right about one thing. Our Paths do differ. You are good at talking shit, and I am good at killing shit talkers."

He then felt what was almost a wave of pure anger hit him, trying to flare up what was there before. But Jake barely registered it as he stepped forward and teleported. Rather than teleport towards Ell'Hakan, he went backward more than three hundred meters as he appeared behind the healer and warrior. An arrow was already nocked as a Splitting Arrow was released towards the woman.

The warrior moved quickly to the side of the healer to defend her, as Jake stepped once more and teleported before shooting again. A barrier emerged around the healer and warrior as Jake stepped and shot three more times from five different angles.

He stopped and shot one more time. The first shots were all explosive arrows, and the barrier was blown up right away as the two were pelted with arcane energy. The very final shot Jake had released was the one stable arrow of the bunch and curved under the shield of the warrior to hit him in the abdomen, making him stumble back.

Ell'Hakan did not stand still as he raised his staff. It was only now that Jake noticed something odd. While it was in the middle of the day, the sunlight was far more intense than usual. It had a red glow, and the air almost shimmered from the sheer heat.

Sun affinity magic, Jake concluded as he dodged back just in time before a beam of burning light descended from above. It burned a hole nearly a dozen meters into the ground right where he had been standing, making Jake frown. The attack was a lot stronger than expected, and from how Ell'Hakan felt, it was clear the man was at a higher level than Jake. Not just one or two levels, but at least over a dozen. His two companions were similarly all higher level than Jake.

But he was not deterred.

In his anger, he had activated Arcane Awakening fully, putting himself on a timer. This was just another fight. One he could win.

The warrior hit with the arrow earlier quickly got healed as Jake continued his attack. He wanted to take down the healer first, but the warrior clearly knew his task was to protect her, so he decided just to kill both of them at once. It was problematic that he was facing the ideal three-man party of a damage-dealing caster, a defensive warrior, and a healer. With none of them being significantly weaker than the others, it made it hard to exploit a weak link.

Magic sprung up all around him as Jake put that larger mana pool to use. His wings appeared and pumped out poison to create a mist covering the entire area. Ell'Hakan himself was too damn hard to lock down and damage, but the healer and warrior? Not so much.

He bombarded them with arcane bolts and exploding orbs, not to damage them but to obscure their vision and give him openings. The first Arcane Powershot landed on the healer not long after, but the woman recovered quickly even after the stable arcane arrow tore off a large part of her chest. The second Powershot hit the warrior, only penetrating deep into his shoulder and making him spin in the air before he stabilized.

Arcane charges were building in both from his marks, and his special little bottle from earlier carried an extra toxic surprise. Ell'Hakan himself failed to hit any attacks no matter what he did. His attempt to manipulate Jake's emotions also failed. Jake was angry. Utterly pissed. But he kept his head cool anyway as he had quite the practice with rampant emotions. This chapter is updated by *novel•fire•net*

"I admit, you are stronger than our prior conversation, as well as our intel, led me to believe," Ell'Hakan spoke just as Jake blasted away his two companions with an arrow stuck in each. Both of them looked tired and, having had their boosting skills going for all this time, had clearly worn them out. Jake, on the other hand, with his monstrous mana pool and massively improved stamina pool, managed fine. The only one not really pushed yet was Ell'Hakan, who seemed oddly disinterested in the fight. He was just

participating in the background to help his companions if it got too dangerous or to keep Jake on his toes and keep the fight at a standstill where the healer could keep up with Jake's damage output.

"When are you going to stop pussying around and fight me?" Jake asked the fucker.

"When the time is right," Ell'Hakan smiled. Jake saw straight through the bluff. He felt more confident than before and knew that the orange fuck wasn't that much stronger than his companions. The magic he used was also big and flashy, consuming a lot of mana. Even if he had a boosting skill, Jake would be fine.

Jake moved again to push his advantage as he wanted to finish off the healer before any of them had the chance to escape. It wasn't time yet to activate his secret weapon... no, he would save that for the very end and take them by surprise. It wasn't like he needed to hurry anyway with how big of an advantage he had, so even if he could admit he was not entirely sure as to the efficacy of his poison, all should be fine.

In fact, he would barely even consider it a fight anymore. He was so much superior and-

Jake's eye opened wide in realization. His emotions had once more been influenced, making him overly confident... but he realized it too late. In an instant, he felt his entire body freeze. He looked upwards and saw an absolutely massive magical circle and two more people floating far above, having been hidden out of his Sphere all this time.

"A profound sense of danger towards attacks, a spherical detection skill with a range between two and five hundred meters in radius. Powerful skills making you a hard opponent to take by surprise... but not impossible," Ell'Hakan spoke as Jake now saw he was holding some kind of orb in his hand that was linked to the magic circle above as they pulsed in synchronicity.

Space itself seemed locked down around Jake as he struggled to release himself. He felt isolated from the outside world, as if he did not belong there, and yet did not feel like he was in any danger. Jake could not even step down to teleport away... if that would even work.

"In the outskirts of the first Pylon city of Earth, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Celestial Child battled. In a fight almost equal, the Celestial Child, Ell'Hakan, came out on top. In a moment of cowardice, the Malefic One's Chosen fled in fear, abandoning not just his city but humanity itself," Ell'Hakan said. "A selfish coward indeed... one not worth ever rallying around."

Jake wanted to talk but was unable to. It was as if he wasn't even in the same space as everyone else. Like he had been shifted to a different reality while still being able to see and hear everything.

“I do hope you hurry,” Ell’Hakan said with a smile. “The World Congress shall be your deadline to set history right.”

Space began to shift and move as far above, a projection appeared. It was an entirely blue moon, far smaller than the moon of Earth. It began to move at a visible speed as Jake faintly felt himself be linked to it. Chained to it. Like the tide was controlled by the moon.

“Celestial Alignment of Yore.”

The orb on Ell’Hakan’s orb shattered as he spat out blood, and Jake felt himself be pulled. He wanted to yell but could not move a single muscle. He wanted to move his mana, but it refused to respond.

Just as he was about to be dragged away, Jake’s eyes focused as the space around him faintly distorted. The very second he began to be dragged, he could move once more, and in that very final moment, he raised both his hands towards his opponents as they glowed green.

Touch of the Malefic Viper.

He also detonated his arcane charges from the Marks but was unable to see the result. Within half a second, he lost sight of Ell’Hakan, the Fort, Haven, and everything else. He kept accelerating as if dragged by heavenly chains across the landscape. Everything blurred and distorted as all he saw were moving colors and silhouettes, his mind unable to process everything.

Then suddenly, it stopped.

But the momentum was not gone. Jake fell to the ground like a meteor at speed surpassing one. He saw the ground a millisecond before he impacted it, only able to slightly angle himself as he hit it. Jake took a rolling fall as he bounced off the ground and flew several more kilometers before his second bounce. He felt his shoulder dislocate from the first impact, but after the second one, he could slightly deaccelerate himself with blasts of mana.

After a few more bounces, Jake landed on the ground and saw that he was lying on a large dune of sand. He breathed heavily as he rolled over and tried to stand up as he spat out some sand that had gotten into his mouth. Jake spat it out along with a good deal of blood from his internal injuries as he tried to orient himself. Trying to understand what the hell had just happened.

Jake, trying to get an idea of where he was, felt for Sylphie’s location using their Union Oath. His eyes shot open as he stared directly down at the sand below him. She was... nearly straight down. Very far too.

It took him a few moments to comprehend what had just happened, and the moment he realized, he gritted his teeth in frustration, not even caring about his injured body.

He had just been flung to the other fucking side of the planet. Jake cursed and clenched his fists as he tried to calm himself own. It was then that he felt a connection be formed.

“Jake, what happened?” he heard Miranda’s voice.

Jake then realized where he had just been fighting. *“Tossed to the other side of the planet... get out of there now. Escape Haven and move towards the center of the Grand Mangrove River. Say I sent you.”*

“Alright,” Miranda answered without any hesitation. *“We shall... they’re here, cutting off the ritual. Will contact once safe.”*

With that, the connection was severed, and Jake was alone. He flopped down on the sand again as he smashed his fist into it.

Everything was fucked. His only consolation was that Jake had at least given those two annoying fucks a nice parting gift.

Ell’Hakan breathed with difficulty as his head pounded him using the orb. The item was now broken, but it had done its job. He smiled as he saw the Chosen be sent flying away. But at the very last moment, he felt it. An overwhelming determination as the human raised both of his hands as they glowed.

But... he was isolated in the space of yore, so nothing should-

Cao’Estill and Ult’Oriel, his best healer and third-best warrior, suddenly collapsed to the ground as their bodies began bleeding from every orifice. Their blood pooled like thin water, their flesh rotting, and their eyes glazed over.

All he could do was look on as both of their bodies decayed and turned to nothing but mush in front of him within seconds, leaving only rotting, unrecognizable shapes behind.

Ell’Hakan narrowed his eyes and frowned deeply. *Plans... must be adapted.*

But they were still on track. This was only the first step, after all.

He turned his gaze towards the direction of Haven as his two companions who had worked on the array joined him.

“What are your orders?” one of them asked.

“Follow me,” Ell’Hakan said. “Let us finally pay this Haven a visit.”

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

Chapter 522: Across The World

Miranda had been observing the battle from afar until suddenly, a huge magic circle appeared and blocked out her view. When it disappeared, Jake was gone, and she hurriedly contacted him with worry only to discover he had been put out of commission and was now somehow on the other side of the planet.

Having seen the battle, Miranda was confused about how Jake had fought but did not question it. She knew their opponent had a Bloodline that influenced emotions in some way, so she wrote it up to that. Not that it mattered right now as she had more important things to do.

Jake's warning before any attack arrived had allowed her to gather people in time. Hank, his children, Neil and his party, Lillian, and Phillip, had arrived in her underground ritual chamber. When Miranda saw Jake and the alien invader fight, she moved right away to have Neil prepare their escape path in case anything went wrong. She only vaguely remembered Jake mentioning this Grand Mangrove River and how he had passed through and met some friendly C-grades, but he seemed adamant that going there would be the wisest.

"I will need more time," Neil said as he worked at high speed to set up the teleportation circle within the chamber. It was the same kind he had used all the way back in E-grade to reach Haven in the first place.

"Alright," Miranda said as she sat down with crossed legs in the middle of her own ritual circle. The altars all around her flared to life as she began to work her magic, first creating a massive green barrier that protected the main city of Haven. Her eyes began to glow green as she took out several orbs and tossed them onto each of the altars and prepared to show the invaders why attacking a witch's lair was considered a bad idea.

Casper frowned deeply as he looked at the approaching army. Priscilla joined him in the city spire with a worried look on her face. "Most of the Ghastpillars are already destroyed, and we won't be able to get the defensive array up and running in anything less than a week."

"I know," Casper said as he kept staring. He had known this day would come. They both had. It was something that repeated itself time and time again. An event that every new universe seemed to go through, a tribulation the Risen always had to overcome.

They were hated by default. As undead, pre-conceived notions about their existence were always present, and they were viewed as evil simply for existing. So for the natives of a planet to seek their destruction should not come as a surprise, even if Casper, Priscilla, and all the leaders of the Risen on Earth hoped they could finally have a peaceful integration. With Jake and others having so much influence and no negative feelings towards the Risen, they had hope... but alas, the cycle repeated.

“The Holy Church joined them too, huh,” Casper said with disappointment as he saw some of the people approaching. A large group. He counted at least ten thousand D-grades from the Holy Church alone, backed up by even more from the United Cities Alliance. Even if Jacob had warned him during the last World Congress the Holy Church was planning something against the Risen... he did not expect this.

“Did you hear more from the Augur? I thought he would stop an attack, or at the very least warn us,” Priscilla asked.

“Nothing from him at all. I can’t even contact him anymore,” Casper shook his head. By now, they had an okay understanding of the unfolding situation, and for whatever reason, it seemed like the Holy Church had made some kind of pact with the United Cities Alliance to wipe out the Risen. This did not mean they had allied with the United Cities Alliance... just that they were willing to help an enemy to crush an even more hated enemy.

It should not be surprising. It was simply history repeating itself.

Casper closed his eyes as dark energy revolved around him. He looked behind and saw their own fighters begin to gather, preparing for battle. They were outnumbered significantly and were not truly an army like the Holy Church or United Cities Alliance. Especially not after many internal issues had popped up due to plants from the damn Alliance, including the destruction of many defensive buildings.

“We just need to buy time,” Priscilla assured him.

“I know,” Casper nodded. But he couldn’t help but wonder... what the fuck was Jacob doing? What was he planning?

“This time is crucial for you to ensure your C-grade evolution is as successful as possible,” the Bishop said as he guided Jacob through the grand hall. “As an Augur of Hope, you may be able to feel when people walk astray or need guidance, but to also know of what options they then have is entirely different.”

Jacob nodded in recognition as he followed the old man. Despite looking like just an average priest, he was a B-grade Bishop of the Holy Church and the leader of the Chapter that Jacob found himself in. Bertram was also off with some of the local templars to train, making them both busy men. Chapters first released on **novel~fire~net**

For a long time, the Holy Church had worked on a solution for people to potentially leave the ninety-third universe, and only a week or so ago, the first gate was successfully made. It was still limited to D-grades and could only send through a few people every day, but it was something. There was also the issue of it being one-way, but that was only a temporary challenge that mages both on Earth and in the wider universe were working on overcoming.

“The students you will meet are all struggling and performing below expectations. Some are veterans of many years, while others are new blood who showed great promise but suddenly began to squander. These were carefully curated, and we believe in your ability to set their fates right and lead them to the best Paths possible for them,” the Bishop said with a smile. “We expect much of you, Augur of Hope.”

Jacob once more nodded. “I shall do my utmost.”

“Good. It is also time you begin to look outwards. To not only focus on the small planet from which you originate. The Holy Church can be found in every universe, and there will always be places that need hope,” the man followed up.

Jacob agreed, but he would want to return to Earth anyway as there was lots of unfinished business there and many people he cared about.

The reason why he had left Earth was to ensure a successful evolution to C-grade. Earth was limited in many ways, and Jacob was implored to go after the gate was established. While he did have some reservations, he also knew he would only be gone for a few months at most, and considering the peaceful state of Earth, it was limited how much the council could mess up in that time, right?

Two flickering wisps observed the movement across the vast mountain range. Monsters of all sorts had assembled but not to fight. To observe. An army had arrived, teleported by what had to be a powerful C-grade. They had appeared extremely close to the Fallen King's territory and not hesitated to attack. A few Pylons were stolen before the King made his move and tore the pathetic cretins to shreds.

But they kept coming, all led by another powerful leader. The monsters of Earth were no monolith. There was no dominant faction, no agreed-upon alliances or customs for how they would operate and interact. Unlike humans, they had no rules. There was only power. Power would get you followers as other monsters would seek to be under your wing. Be it for Records, treasures, or simply safety. This was why they gathered around powerful leaders.

The Fallen King was one such powerful leader with many beasts, elementals, and other monsters loyal to him.

Loyal until another monster presented itself capable of challenging his position. The Fallen King had never truly viewed this as a threat. C-grades would not come to

challenge him as while there were no set rules, there was simply nothing in it for them to hunt down a D-grade. Even if that D-grade was strong enough to challenge a C-grade. There was also the fear of failing to kill him and the Fallen King returning for revenge. With the enhanced intelligence all C-grades experienced, it was no surprise none had been foolish enough to challenge him yet.

Until that day.

The army that had dared invade his domain was led by a creature, unlike anything the Fallen King had met before. Shifting ash, a living storm of half-burning embers, and a form that remained ever-changing. The Fallen King recognized this foe as the creature assembled itself into a form floating in between two mountains.

A Unique Lifeform. Like he.

[Ashen Phantom Devourer – lvl 199]

At the same level as him too. Both standing at the precipice, refining themselves and reaching for perfection. Proving their Paths.

“A Devourer by choice. Your Path is apparent to all. Laughable, as it is a foolish one,” the Fallen King spoke, his voice spreading throughout the mountain range for tens of thousands of monsters to hear.

“A King who has already Fallen once dares speak of foolishness. Be honored, and become sustenance for my Path,” the Ashen Phantom Devourer spoke as the sky trembled as it released its power.

“Fallen... and having learned from his fall,” the King answered back as his own power manifested, and the trembling sky was pushed back, space itself cracking from the clashing power of two Unique Lifeforms at the peak of D-grade.

They had no true reason to fight. They had never met, knew nothing of each other. And yet there was no doubt or hesitation in either of them. It was not a question of why or intent – neither needed any reason or justification. All there was left was the fight to discover who of them was supreme.

Jake felt like shit and just wanted to charge into the horizon to get back, but before doing anything else, he had to heal. Arcane Awakening had ravaged his body quite a bit, and the entire flung-across-the-planet thing had certainly not helped. He felt lucky he had landed in sand and not rock or maybe smashed into a mountain, but a part of him also doubted it was luck. The words Ell'Hakan had spoken made him believe the plan was never to kill him.

He quickly chugged a healing potion and entered meditation as Jake considered what kind of bullshit skill had been used on him. It did not seem like something a D-grade

should be capable of at all. Was it due to that orb? The ritual circle? Or was it just a skill of an insanely high rarity? It had Yore in the name, so what if that was the skill granted by Yip of Yore from his True Blessing? Jake had gotten a divine rarity skill, and even if Ell'Hakan did not get that, it had to be at least mythical or something, right? Maybe above mythical but below divine, assuming there were rarities in between.

There were so many doubts in his mind, but one thing was clear as day: Jake had been countered. From the very moment he appeared, he had been playing along with whatever Ell'Hakan had planned. He hated the thought, but chances are killing Chris was done only with the intent to piss him off. If he had not done that, Jake would have just appeared confused about why the orange guy was there. But with the death of Chris, Jake had blown his fuse immediately and attacked like an absolute idiot. He had not acted according to anything he had practiced at all but just been tunnel-visioning from start to end. It was an utter failure on his part.

What made it even worse was that Jake had no fucking idea what it was all about. If the plan had always been to fight him, only to toss him away, why fight in the first place? To buy time? Did they even need to buy time with fighting? If Ell'Hakan had just talked, Jake would have been delayed plenty. And what did he hope to accomplish by sending Jake away? To take over Haven? Hurt those who lived there? If that was what he wanted, he could have just broken the monument before Jake could return to Earth. He clearly had time.

No, he had wanted Jake to return, and he had wanted to send him away to where he was now. But for the life of him, Jake could not figure out why the fuck he would want that. Just to try and spread rumors and ruin Jake's reputation? Why the fuck would he think Jake would care about that?

Jake was annoyed beyond belief as he tried to focus on something more positive. Like the fact he at least got in a nice blow at the end. He had killed two of them, and he knew from their level of power they were not weak, and to cultivate people of that power this early on in the integration meant a significant investment. No matter what, it had to have been a loss that stung.

Checking his notifications, he saw he also gained a level.

****You have slain [Nahoom - lvl 191 / Sworn Celestial Mender - lvl 183 / Servant of the Celestial Child – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.***

****You have slain [Nahoom - lvl 187 / Royal Shield Guard - lvl 175 / Servant of the Celestial Child – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.***

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 173 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 178 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

He was a bit confused at seeing them both have the same profession, and both have it maxed out. Jake had heard from Miranda that she had gotten skills related to Jake, so was this the same thing? It had to be, right? Or was Celestial Child just some title Ell'Hakan stole from someone else? More questions he had no answers to.

As for how he had killed the two of them... well, let's just say he had gotten some good stuff out of his long alchemy sessions and his extreme spending.

Jake had made a little extra something shortly before returning from the Order. He only had a few bottles so far and had just used one, but the effect had been more than satisfactory.

[Sleeping Night Toxin (Rare)] – Sometimes, the most potent poison is that which is never felt or seen before it is too late. Mixing eth, hemo- and necrotic toxins, a potent yet harmless poison has been made. Will be in a hidden sleeping state by default, making it near-undetectable. If injected into a foe, it will simply linger within the Soulshape, slowly dispersing harmlessly. However, if awakened, the toxins will all spring to life, seeking to kill their target with necrotic and hemotoxin properties. Will cause direct damage to both the Soulshape and physical body of those infected once awakened. Has an increased effect if the target is unaware of the infection upon activation.

It was Jake's magnum opus so far when it came to poisons. It had combined everything he had learned and was far more challenging to make than anything else he had. Jake's own success chance when concocting it was in the single digits percentage-wise, and each concoction only gave him one or two bottles. Not to mention the cost. The toxin was far more complex than anything he had made prior too. Shit, he had even somehow mixed in a bit of that stealth attack concept.

As with other creations, the poison's weaknesses and limitations translated to more overall power once these aspects were circumvented. Rather than slowly infect someone with poison and damage them little by little, this poison was instant. It would spread throughout harmlessly until Jake activated it using his newly upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper. He had considered making a poison like this for a long time but had only truly begun after upgrading the skill.

He continued his meditation for a while longer and felt in pretty good shape again. He had only really expended stamina and mana during the fight, and his health was fixed quickly with the earlier potion. Opening his eyes, Jake stood up and stretched a bit. Rustling his cloak, he also got out all of the damn sand as he finally got a good look around and just saw desert all around for what had to be thousands of kilometers in each direction.

Jake knew there was nothing else to do but get moving.

Yet as he stood there and considered what direction to move in, he felt faint tremors below. He wondered if it was coming for him but felt the movements go elsewhere. Looking out into the desert, he saw some stones spread around but nothing else.

Suddenly the ground rumbled as three yellow pillars that seemed to meld into the background shot up from the ground as if coming up for air. Large wriggling forms more than a hundred meters long, all three of which Jake quickly Identified.

[Veilskin Sand Worm – lvl 197]

[Veilskin Sand Worm – lvl 196]

[Veilskin Sand Worm – lvl 192]

Jake stared at them a bit in awe as he saw something else out of the corner of his eye. Hundreds of kilometers away, it looked as if a tower was suddenly erected as a massive form emerged. Its length had to be measured in kilometers.

[Behemoth Sand Worm – lvl ???]

Similar scenes played out around him as Jake realized he had found himself smack in the middle of Sand Worm territory... which made him realize that sometimes you have to find the good in the bad. Jake had a lot of pent-up frustration and a long journey ahead of him.

The worms wouldn't help with the distance, but they sure as hell would help with the frustration as he took out his bow. He knew he needed to figure out how to not get fucked over again by Ell'Hakan... but no matter what, more power would help whatever anti-fuckery method he found.

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Chapter 523: Just Sand-Witch Things

Due to the suddenness of the attack, many of those behind it still remained within Haven. They believed they could simply lie low and hide, acting like normal citizens until their side came out on top. It had worked for a time... but only because Miranda had been distracted.

Every action carried intent, and this intent followed you like a dark fog. Not to normal people... but to Miranda, there were traces left behind at the broken teleportation circle for her to track. Creatures that existed only in the minds and dreams had seen what they had done. It did not take her long to locate those who had been behind the destruction of the teleporters.

They were just mostly normal people, some not even D-grade. Miranda could admit that the security around their teleporters had been shit. No one expected an attack, and she still found any potential explanation for the attack nonsensical. Haven had done all it could to stay neutral, so why the hell target them?

Annoyed but pressed for time, Miranda did not have time to interrogate them. Considering their goal of escape, she would not have time to either as she made the call.

The man hid his face as he walked through the busy panicked streets. Everyone were confused as they had only heard that the Viper's Chosen had returned to Earth and engaged the alien invader. This confusion turned to something akin to panic when the fight stopped, and a barrier encompassed the entire city.

None of it was his concern. The citizens were safe; they were never the targets. He saw them as victims, the lot of them.

People sought their homes, and so did the man. He got inside and quickly closed the door, and activated what defensive measures each house was equipped with. After taking off his cloak, he headed toward his living room.

Plopping down on the couch, he let out a sigh of relief. He and the others had not been discovered yet, and considering the lack of response, he doubted they would. All he had to do was wait now.

Feeling relatively safe, he got up again and went to grab a bottle from his fridge. Well, it was just a box with a magic circle to cool it down, but it worked as a fridge.

He walked over and opened it just as he heard a knock on his door. The door to his bedroom. His eyes opened wide as he whipped his head towards the door, with his hand still reaching for the bottle stashed in the back of the fridge. Yet rather than a bottle, he felt his hand meet something soft.

The man barely had time to turn his head before two hands grasped his wrist and dragged him into the fridge, slamming the door behind him. A faint sound was emitted from within before the door opened again – the only thing remaining a severed hand clutching a bottle.

--

Miranda quickly eliminated all of them after summoning the Drowned Swamp Maidens, using one of her more efficient rituals to kill those significantly weaker than herself and within her domain. How the skill worked exactly wasn't something Miranda entirely knew. What she did know was that it called upon the spirits of the Drowned Swamp Maidens, which were more conceptual apparitions than anything truly real. They were living ideas.

Getting rid of the terrorists – because that is what they were – had only taken her around a minute. In that time, Ell'hakan and his two followers had not rushed over but simply walked up to the edge of the barrier at a leisurely pace.

She observed as the man stopped in front of the barrier. He raised his hand and touched it for a faint moment and waited five or so seconds before speaking. “Ms. Wells, I believe you should be able to hear me, am I correct?”

Miranda briefly opened her eyes and saw Neil was still hard at work, having even put his party members to work placing down materials in the circle. Closing them again, she decided to buy time. At that moment, when she felt his hand touch the barrier, she felt a pulse go into it, making her tremble. She did not know what it was and decided that if the guy wanted to talk... she would talk. Well, *shewouldn't* talk.

Focusing, she took out a small doll and infused some magic into it. Placing it in the middle of the circle, she said an incantation and immersed her mind.

In the outside world, a figure faded into existence. A human-sized doll looking quite a bit like Miranda appeared, looking more than a little scary with its oversized buttons for eyes and amateur craftsmanship. Miranda had to sew it herself, and damn was she bad at sewing.

But the doll worked as its mouth moved. “Is it not a basic skill expected of a City Lord to have some level of perception within the domain they rule?”

“It is. I must say, this is my first time ever meeting a witch, and I am already intrigued,” Ell'Hakan spoke, looking at the doll. “I would like to apologize for before. I believed it necessary to show that I have ways to break barriers such as this to make you come out for a talk. Ah, on that, I would advise you to not rely too much on the Pylon for city defenses. As a noble with a significantly higher rank and a profession that allows it, I possess skills to combat it quite effectively. Instead, I would work on making your own skills the primary basis of the barrier, with the Pylon only acting as an auxiliary energy source.”

Miranda looked confused at the man speaking. Enough to doubt if Ell'Hakan could influence her through the puppet. But she quickly ruled that out simply by how she assumed it worked. If his ability was to influence emotions, he had to influence the soul, and the puppet she had sent did not contain anything to influence. Which begged the question:

“Why are you telling me that?”

“Friendly advice from one ruler to another,” Ell’Hakan answered. “And a good icebreaker that shows my intent. I want to make an educated guess and say you are currently working on a method of escape or some kind of counterattack. Probably escape, considering I just defeated the Chosen of the Viper.”

“You did not defeat him; you just delayed him and pissed him off,” Miranda countered in a curt tone.

“I did what I intended. Today was not the time for an actual fight,” the man nodded in recognition. “I will just lay the cards out on the table. I have no interest in causing you any harm, Ms. Wells, but I have made a deal with the United Cities Alliance, as they call themselves. They very much would like to see you dead.”

“Are you really going with the “it’s not personal” line?” Miranda scoffed.

“Not really. I am going with the line of saying that you should escape. I will not stop you. But I will warn you that the United Cities Alliance will try to take you down. From what I heard, the Chosen’s influence on this planet would be significantly weakened and his current political position ruined if you were to die,” Ell’Hakan explained.

“Doesn’t sound like a reason to suddenly spare me and not break in here and now,” Miranda answered. She briefly disconnected from her doll, and Neil signaled her that he was soon ready. Entering it again, she saw Ell’Hakan shake his head and chuckle.

“We both know that entering wouldn’t lead to a pleasant experience. For either of us. What you are capable of is not pertinent information, and I would prefer not to take such an unnecessary risk. The Verdant Witches are notorious for their mysticism, and you are none the different. With me having no interest in attacking you, simply waiting for you to leave seems like the best cause of action. Ah, but do be warned that if you choose to stay, I will have to act at one point or another,” Ell’Hakan warned.

“You want me to just leave Haven in your hands?” Miranda shot back. That was exactly what she was going to do, but she had to at least act like the man didn’t have the upper hand. Also... she wanted to know what he was planning.

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“I will lay no claim on anything here today. Someone from the United Cities Alliance will come and take charge for now. No one has any interest in killing the citizens, so rest easy,” Ell’Hakan assured her.

“Grand words coming from someone who is all about bullshit lies and making up stories.”

“But I do speak the truth, as no story matters if there are none to remember and tell it,” Ell’Hakan simply said.

“A story that is a lie. What are you even hoping to accomplish? Ruin our reputations? Even if you succeed in doing that, how will it matter? Can you truly call that an actual victory?” Miranda asked. “To me, it all seems like the pathetic actions of someone too weak to battle Lord Thayne head-on.”

Miranda hoped to get a bit of a rise out of the guy. Maybe make him temporarily lose his cool and overshare. She had confidence that even if he wanted to attack now, she could hold him off long enough for Neil to be done.

“Fighting... holds little meaning,” Ell’Hakan spoke. “A fight is always just a single line in the history books. A declaration of the outcome after the fact. Tell me, how many were truly aware of our brief battle here today? A few dozen? Add on a few bored gods gazing upon events they truly don’t care about, and it is little more than a handful. My words of the battle will echo more true than anyone else. All they know is that a fight took place, and it ended up with me left standing and the Malefic’s Chosen gone. I know what you are hoping to accomplish, but let me assure you; a story is better told if not spoiled beforehand. Killing the Chosen would have been a waste. I am not telling a small tale but a true epic.”

“One where you try to define what is the truth,” Miranda said.

“Precisely,” Ell’Hakan smiled. “I have enjoyed our brief conversation, even if it was rather one-sided. I would advise you to leave now or show your hand as I can delay no longer before my partners get dissatisfied with my dallying.”

He snapped his fingers as Miranda’s doll caught fire and burned down in an instant, throwing Miranda back to her real body. In the middle of the ritual circle, her small doll had now turned to ashes. She only had time to orient herself before she felt a pulse go through the barrier. The pulse seemed to attack not the barrier’s energy but the very framework.

“How long?” Miranda asked.

“Done, was just waiting for you,” Neil said.

Miranda nodded as she hurried over to the teleportation circle. Just before stepping on it, she briefly spoke a final spell before getting teleported away along with most other notable characters in Haven – besides Sultan and Arnold.

No one liked sand. As spoken by a not-that-wise man long ago: It’s coarse, rough, irritating, and gets everywhere. And that was normal sand. Magical sand was even worse. Not because it was finer and somehow more everywhere, but because it sure as hell was coarser and rougher by a significant magnitude.

And then there were sandstorms. Sandstorms on Earth before the system could be devastating, but a post-system sandstorm was on an entirely different level.

Jake was already in an even worse mood than usual when it arrived. He had tried to hurry through the desert while hunting down sand worms, but the fuckers were borderline impossible to kill. Even the peak D-grade ones Jake could not easily get rid of. Their bodies were massive, and they clearly had an equally massive health pool, but the worst part was their behavior. He had yet to have a single one even try to fight back. He had even tried to attack a C-grade, done all the preparations, been as ready as he could, only for him to land a single Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter before the worm dove straight down and swam away for him to never see it again.

That is when he truly realized... these worms did not at all care about fighting. They just ate stuff. Jake had wondered how that would even work, as the surface was bound to run out of natural treasures and high-energy items at some point.

Which is where the sandstorms came in.

It was like the very horizon had moved towards him. A towering wall of sand reaching into the sky for several kilometers had barreled towards Jake as he tried to fly through the desert. He had reacted quickly and tried to mimick the worms by boring into the ground and hiding until things blew over. This should work, right?

Wrong.

Because this sandstorm was a true marvel of the elements. It was a zone of earth and wind mana that mixed and created what could almost be called a moving domain. A true wonderland for creatures that relied on these energies. Or one to spawn such creatures.

Elementals simply came into being within the massive sandstorm, and while the sand worms did not want to fight, these elementals sure did. Like as if a giant vacuum cleaner had been turned on, several elementals sucked up all the sand around Jake and pulled him out of the desert.

He felt sand hit his body and himself take damage as it impacted him with near super-sonic speeds. Sand even found the eyeholes of his mask and hit one eye, forcing him to close it. Jake was well and truly pissed as he used his one good eye to Identify one of the elementals attacking him.

[Sand Elemental – lvl 184]

One would maybe think that this kind of environment was bad for Jake. And they would be right. But that did not really matter much when all he faced were D-grade elementals.

Arcane Awakening in the stable mode activated as a faint arcane barrier covered his entire body. This passive shield was usually not a big deal, but when it blocked

thousands of small “attacks” every second? It allowed him to effectively ignore the environmental effects and move to kill his foes as he did the one thing that always worked: blow them the hell up with destructive arcane arrows.

Meanwhile, Jake made his way out of the sandstorm. As he traveled through it, he saw entire sand worms had been dragged out of the ground and into the storm, as well as hundreds of other creatures. The sand worms seemed to make it out, though, as they worked together and used sand magic of their own to help others escape. Elementals consumed the creatures that could not get away, and it was as if the sandstorm itself absorbed some of the energy whenever something died.

However, while the sandstorm took, it also gave, as it left behind treasures. Treasure generated from the sandstorm itself that simply dropped onto the sand and was left behind. If not for being stuck in the middle of the damn storm, Jake would have marveled at the ways the ecosystem had evolved.

After more than an hour of struggle, Jake finally made it out of the sandstorm and saw the massive natural phenomenon just continue sweeping across the desert. His momentary sense of relief from being out was promptly broken as he realized he had been flying back in the direction he had just come from to get out of the damn storm.

“Fuck me,” Jake muttered as he wondered what to do. As he was flying up in the air, he saw dozens of sandworms begin to emerge below to consume the natural treasures dropped from the sandstorm. As Jake stared at them, he got an idea. An idea that just might work.

He just needed one of them to eat him first...

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Chapter 524: Into the Ground

Getting a massive sandworm to eat you was actually way easier than Jake had expected. Not that Jake should have expected much from the get-go, it was a stupid expectation. All he had done was just land on the sand, get semi-close to a natural treasure while using Arcane Stealth, and boom, a worm popped up and swallowed him. It was a level 198 worms, so damn close to evolution too.

The worm nearly instantly noticed it had caught something it didn't want and tried to spit him out. However, Jake held on inside its massive maw as he spoke. “Hey! Worm! Make a deal!”

It did not react but kept trashing and trying to spit Jake out. That is when he realized that the sand worms had no ears and probably not even a sense of hearing, making him switch to telepathy.

"Worm. Make deal. You help me, I help you. If not, death." Follow current novels on [novel★fire★net](#)

As he said the words, Jake took out a handful of earth affinity herbs and tossed them down the gullet of the worm. It was a gamble... that paid off immediately as the worm stopped moving. By now, Jake was hanging onto the flesh walls of the giant worm's mouth as he spoke again.

"If you help me get that way," Jake sent telepathically as he poked the side of the giant worm's mouth with a weak arcane bolt. *"I will feed you. Okay?"*

It should not come as a surprise that the giant worm could not speak. Jake was really gambling on this idea as he assumed that these sand worms were dumb as bricks and-

"I apologize; I think there is some kind of misunderstanding. I did not mean to try and eat you... actually, what are you?" Jake heard a deep rumbling voice in his head.

Wait, what? Jake questioned himself.

"You understand me?" Jake asked, confused.

"I think? I am more questioning how you can speak. You aren't a worm. Or are you? You don't look like one, but I have seen weird worms before..." the creature spoke.

"I am not a worm, no," Jake made clear. *"I am human and ended up here on accident. All I am looking for is a way out of the desert."*

"Human? What are those? And why leave? You can't move properly outside. A few tried. Oh, unless you get stronger and evolve, I saw one able to do it. Are you evolved?" the overly curious worm asked.

Jake had to admit, when he began his plan, he had not expected to have a conversation with a worm. He had more hoped to communicate his intent and perhaps find a way to nudge the worm in the right direction while bribing it with stuff.

"I am not evolved, no, but I can move properly outside. I cannot move properly here, though, which is why I need your help," Jake said. *"If you can help me get out of the desert, I can give you good stuff in return."*

The worm fell silent for a few moments, still just sitting there while poking out of the sand like a tower with its mouth wide open, making it so Jake could fly out at any moment. *"What kind of stuff?"* it finally asked.

Jake smiled a bit to himself as he took out one of the orbs he had looted from one of the many Earth Elementals he had killed while traveling with Carmen. *"Things like this,"* Jake said as he threw the orb down the long tunnel that was the worm's mouth.

Seconds passed before the worm answered. *"Okay. I will help you, human. Also, don't I have to? If not, I will die."*

He had kind of forgotten he had threatened death before. Jake had only really done it, as that kind of intent was something animals tended to understand.

"I promise I won't hurt you at all. Instead, let's make this something to benefit us both."

"Sounds better than death, that is for sure," the worm said, Jake detecting a hint of sarcasm in the voice. Had he found himself a sassy giant sand worm?

The next few minutes passed as Jake talked with the worm and got a better idea of how their species worked. The worms were actually damn good at magic and moved primarily through some kind of earth telekinesis to push them forward using the sand, allowing them to travel at frankly insane speeds for their size.

To hunt for treasures better, the worms all stayed in contact through some kind of telepathy network. It worked by them linking up with one another while in the area, and often a single C-grade always stayed close to the larger groups of worms to help them in case anything went wrong. There were creatures besides the Sand Elementals that hunted the worms, but most never chased down into the sand, so as long as the worms could warn others in time, they stayed safe. All in all, Jake learned to not disrespect the intelligence of giant sand worms.

In return, Jake told the worm of things outside the desert as he also guided where they should go.

Using threads of stable arcane mana, he anchored himself to the side of the worm's mouth and got into a comfortable position. Contrary to what one would expect, the inside of the worm was not moist at all but dry as the desert outside. The walls of the mouth were also rough and tough like rock, likely from repeatedly swallowing sand. Something the worm would avoid doing with its passenger along.

That is how Jake managed to catch a ride inside a giant sand worm as he traveled what had to be a few kilometers under the sand. They shot forward with the speed of a bullet through the desert, and Jake faintly felt a few worms around them at times, but being inside of one made them all ignore him. The worm did say that a few detected him, but the worm just explained it away somehow. Jake chose to trust his driver in this, as honestly? It seemed like a stand-up worm. Would definitely rate it five stars.

He felt good enough to enter meditation, where he finally found time to rummage on one of his most pertinent issues: what if Ell'Hakan could do that weird transportation skill again?

It didn't seem likely, but Jake saw no reason to gamble on that one. Even if he didn't have more orbs or a ritual circle, it was a huge risk anyway, simply because Jake had no way to currently combat whatever concept the skill relied on.

While there were aspects of it, it wasn't space magic. Jake had a strong feeling that even if he managed to break through and use One Step, he would not have been freed. Maybe he would have moved a bit, but the skill would still have taken effect and flung him away, making the few hundred meters he managed to teleport insignificant.

One Step was a skill that was purely space magic. It relied one hundred percent on the concept of space to travel, so if space magic was just a part of it, it wouldn't allow him to get out. He needed something far different.

Considering his first escape skill was Shadow Vault, Jake popped into his Soulspace and-

"No," sim-Jake said the moment he appeared.

Jake exited his Soulspace again and considered his second option. One he had seen be used to escape a very perilous situation before when used by its maker.

He was naturally thinking of Wings of the Malefic Viper.

The attack on the Risen had started as expected. The weaker individuals took the frontlines from the side of the Holy Church and United Cities Alliance while the Risen tried to preserve their numbers and strength. They tried to only send out the stronger parties from their side as this was not a battle they could win. Only delay. Priscilla stayed back to organize everything while Casper had chosen to take to the battlefield.

It's a bit weird when I think about it, Casper thought to himself as he released his curses upon the opposing army.

He was a Risen and what many would call a bringer of death and misery with his specialization in curses. Yet, Casper realized that he hadn't actually killed any humans since the Tutorial. Not even during the Treasure Hunt had he taken a single life due to how the Risen had approached the event.

Until today, that is.

War was a common occurrence in the multiverse. He knew the Blightfather and the undead faction as a whole condoned these kinds of wars and viewed them as a good thing. It helped weed out the population and, in turn, gave rise to not only more

powerful, but more talented individuals. War was far more than a single fight. It was a long struggle and something that forced you to not only train your skills but your mind. Those who came out of a war on top either had their mentality steeled or broken.

Casper himself was an example of the latter. He had already been broken once during the Tutorial. He knew he was not made for war. He hated it. He despised the senseless killing of people fighting for things that were either lies or that they barely believed in. Most of the invaders from the Holy Church or United Cities Alliance were only there because of what their factions had lied about or due to sheer ignorance. They had no personal reason. Casper hated every moment he spent on the battlefield... which only made him stronger.

It didn't help that he was really fucking good at it.

Curses were fueled by emotions, and the battlefield was a very emotional place. Casper simply had to fuel the fire as he took advantage of the area. One had to remember that the Risen were the defenders, and even if many of their defensive measures had been sabotaged, far from all had been struck. The most potent defenses only a handful were aware of. One of these defensive items was called the Thousand Splinters Pillar. To the naked eye, it looked like a giant rotten tree trunk, but to Casper, it was a battery of infinite weapons.

Casper flew above the battlefield with the large pillar floating behind him as he sent splinters raining down towards the battlefield. Every time a splinter hit someone, they were struck by a mental attack. Those unable to resist lashed out and began attacking those around them mercilessly as their perception of who was an ally or friend changed. To make it worse then, the curse energy in each splinter would be amplified every time the person attacked someone.

Within the first half of an hour of the battle, Casper killed hundreds. Within the first day, over a thousand. It slowed down with time as they adapted, but Casper was just stronger. Some were not even D-grade, and Casper quickly realized something was off but kept fighting. At the beginning of the second day, after a long rest where others had to take to the battle, he pushed forward as he killed more and more, soon leaving behind the other Risen. If he was ahead of the others, he could limit casualties on their side.

Keeping up and pressing his advantage, Casper soon found himself close to enemy lines. He stopped, and as this moment, his Spirit Mark resonated, and he heard Priscilla speak.

"Retreat for now. They are just throwing bodies at us to tire us out both mentally and in resources."

Casper Instantly agreed as he began to make his way back. He stared at the battlefield below and saw corpses everywhere. Most were from the Holy Church, but Priscilla was

right... these were just meat shields. Proof once more of the ruthlessness of the Holy Church when it came to war. They were willing to make any sacrifice as long as they won. Their own elites also had cowardly stayed back from the moment Casper rejoined the battle.

One of the defensive measures they still had on the side of the Risen was a single Orb of Second Awakening – a one-time use item that would send a specially attuned death mana pulse out to reanimate those who had died as undead. Not risen, just mindless monsters. But the Church and United Cities clearly knew this as flames constantly swept across the battlefield, burning the bodies of the fallen, followed by pulses from the priests of the Holy Church to "purify" the souls. It was cruel but effec-

"Watch out!" Casper suddenly heard mid-retreat.

He did not react in time, but a shield still appeared and blocked a beam of light that had been headed straight for him as one of his pre-prepared spells activated. Casper's eyes opened wide as a second attack arrived, this time from directly below. He retreated away, towards the battlefield once more, as a sword of light cut the area he had just stood. The air shimmered as a figure was revealed from invisibility. As he appeared, so did his comrades.

"Thousands dead to isolate me in an ambush..." Casper muttered.

Five people had appeared, and he recognized three of them as the party members of Bertram. It was the healer Noor, the swordsman Lucian and mage Joshua. Notable absent were the two strongest people in the party, Maria and Bertram.

The two replacements were also an archer and a warrior.

"Thousands of fates realized as they enter the Holyland with honor," the priestess, Noor, said.

God damn fanatics, Casper cursed as he saw no need for further words. With the pillar still floating behind him, Casper counterattacked as he prioritized getting back to safety. Lucian cut him off and tried to strike Casper but was intercepted by a wooden barrier that exploded in his face.

Joshua released a beam of light that forced Casper to dodge as he sent cursed stakes in retaliation. The archer and warrior also joined the fray and tried to pressure the Risen, but the difference was clear. Which only made Casper frown more as they should know they didn't stand a chance. Which meant it was as he and Priscilla expected...

"Do you need my help?" Lyra asked him from within his pendant, but Casper refused.

*"Save your energy in case they have a trick up their sleeve. They have something planned, and I may need you to get us out of here,"*Casper answered. He had not overextended without a backup plan.

Lyra acknowledged as she was ready to unleash her power if anything went awry. Casper handled the fight fine on his own, but killing any one of them was an issue. He lacked in the damage output department as he was the type of fighter to slowly build up curses in his foes or lead them into traps. With no time to set up traps, Casper just had to fight with his wooden stakes and general curse magic as he ever-so-slowly tried to get away.

The group had only revealed themselves the moment Casper had begun retreating, so it was clear something was up. He tried probing out responses as he used a boosting skill and pressed Lucian hard. Giant stakes appeared all around Casper as he made them connect to the pillar floating behind him, sending out pulses of pure curse energy.

Casper was about to explode the entire thing as he felt something was off.

"You fucking bastards," Casper muttered as he looked down. Thousands of motes of light had appeared, floating in the air as Noor spoke an incantation.

"Holy martyrs, heed my call!" the insane priestess yelled as the many motes of light began moving.

Casper had underestimated the depravity of the Holy Church. These people were not just meat shields; they were straight-up sacrifices. He knew this kind of magic; it was something the Holy Church had deployed before. Each of the killed members from the Holy Church had carried on them a mark that effectively turned them into dead people walking to bring out more power, and when they then died, all their remaining energy would be focused into the mark. The holy "purification" earlier was not to cleanse their souls or whatever either, but simply a way to prime the motes.

The motes of light flew up and entered a mark on the swordsman Lucian. Casper was perplexed for a moment until he realized what they were doing- *These people are batshit insane.*

Lucian began glowing with intense light as Casper tried to back away, but the four others moved to stop him. Each of them had activated all their boosting skills to try and keep him still as Lucian's aura grew with every moment.

Just as he was about to unleash it all, Casper snickered a bit.

"Lyra. Now."

Casper's body suddenly glowed green as a ghostly form appeared above him. Lyra opened her mouth and let out a fitting unholy scream that sent out a wave of soul

energy. At the same same, the pillar exploded, sending splinters in every direction. Everyone were stunned and pelted with splinters as Casper's entire body turned green and transparent before he flew straight down towards the ground.

Lucian broke through the stun effect and chased him, surpassing Casper's speed and catching up to him rapidly. The Risen pressed himself even more, and he felt his body burn from the man's sheer presence as he looked like a miniature sun. Lucian's blade closed in just as Casper reached the ground... and continued.

The blade impacted the soil as a huge explosion shook the battlefield, sending shockwaves out. A bright light flashed before it subsided, leaving only a deep hole in the ground as well as a struggling Lucian. He tried to strike again, but his arm broke mid-swing as his body started to turn to motes of light. A few seconds later, not a single trace of him remained as his body had been consumed by the holy power.

Back behind the walls, a ghostly green figure emerged right next to Priscilla. It was naturally Casper who quickly turned corporal again before slumping to the ground. "Those absolute maniacs actually fucking did it."

"We expected it," Priscilla sighed, still clearly troubled by the sheer level of fanaticism displayed by the church.

Casper nodded as he looked over at a certain cave. "Is it time we make our grand exit?"

"Most have already been evacuated," Priscilla answered.

"Go now," Casper said. "I will help the rest retreat from the battlefield as you lead the last ones in there."

"We're really doing this," Priscilla said, uncertainty clear on her face.

"We tried and failed," Casper said. "So let's just stick to the original plan. We should have just accepted long ago that Earth would never be a home for us anyway."

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Chapter 525: Making (Unpleasant) Business Deals

Wings of the Malefic Viper was honestly a bit of a weird skill in Jake's repertoire when Jake thought about it. Mainly in that he didn't really need one of its primary functions anymore: the ability to fly. Jake could fly just using mana manipulation already.

This meant the skill now only served as a way to pump out poison mist. It did add a bit of maneuverability while flying, but it was not that major. Jake knew that a lot of the skills Records went into simply summoning the wings in their phantasmal form and adding them to the Soulshape, but that wasn't exactly something Jake "needed" either.

Jake still used the wings a lot due to their relatively low upkeep, which meant the only time he really spent resources on them was with the initial summoning and when he pumped out poison. The poison pumped out also wasn't exactly impressive. It mostly just served as a way to keep his current poison active and the occasional area of effect attack.

Upgrading the poison mist aspect of the skill did not appeal to him either. Besides, if he upgraded his Blood of the Malefic Viper, he would inadvertently also upgrade the mist. There was also the approach of trying to make them more durable or perhaps increase the maneuverability and overall flight speed. There was even the approach of going the same direction as Draskil, where his wings allowed him short-range teleports and speed-ups in battle. His version was clearly one specialized for movement in combat and taking advantage of his existing physical stats. But that wasn't the direction Jake wanted to take it.

During his vision, where he saw Villy get smacked by Valdemar, he had seen Wings of the Malefic Viper be used as an escape skill to great effect. He had felt how the wings had somehow been activated, and a "tunnel" of sorts had been formed that allowed him to escape. Jake wanted something like that.

He wanted an escape skill, not necessarily to run from a fight he could not win like Villy had, but to escape situations that rendered him stuck or sealed in some way. Like the skill, Ell'Hakan had used that had seemed to isolate Jake from the rest of the world for its duration.

One Step was already better at long-distance movement anyway. It was a legendary skill specialized in travel, while Wings had so many other aspects. There were some issues with upgrading it, though.

Having already been shown the skill twice, Jake was not sure if he could see it again. It did say that he could only view a vision of a skill once, but did the one he had count? It felt more like that one had been about Fangs of the Malefic Viper rather than Wings.

Nevertheless, Jake tried to use the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill as he focused on Wings of the Malefic Viper. Not necessarily to use it, but to see if he even could, and to his disappointment, the skill did not activate right way. This left him even more unsure as he still didn't know if it was because he didn't fulfill some requirement to see the vision or because he had used his one chance on the skill.

He also tried to reflect on the feeling back during the vision he had before, but it was all too blurry for him to remember. His focus back then had been on Fangs of the Malefic

Viper and Fang of Man and not Wings, so even when he had felt the escape technique, his mind had partly been elsewhere.

"*You busy?*" the worm suddenly asked Jake as he meditated on the issue.

"*Only a little,*" Jake answered. "*Why do you ask?*"

"*You said you wanted to hurry, right? The problem is that up ahead is the territory of scorpions, and they like to hide in the sand and attack if we try to go through, so we tend to avoid them. Avoiding them and going around will be slower, though... but if the human is strong, then maybe...*" the worm said very leadingly.

"*Let me guess, they have a C-grade leader of some kind?*" Jake asked.

"*Yep, and it is very dangerous. One of the big worms tried to scare them off once but was hit, and it took weeks to recover from the nasty venom. We aren't that good at fighting, if you haven't noticed, and trying to swallow them wouldn't end well as they have tough bodies and are very poisonous even when eaten. A few worms have eaten some of them, and it never ended well,*" the worm explained.

"*So I guess this all for the well-being of worm society?*" Jake asked a bit teasingly.

"*Their leader may or may not also be guarding a very tasty-looking rock that I wouldn't complain if I happened to eat,*" the worm admitted, making its intentions clear. Even if worm society was very altruistic and they believed in sharing, then there was still some greed when it came to unique, powerful natural treasures. The C-grades tended to monopolize these according to what the worm had told him, and the only exception was when a treasure was found that would allow another worm to break through to C-grade. Another C-grade among them was far more valuable than the limited growth of one of the existing C-grade worms, and often these treasures didn't really benefit one already in C-grade that much.

The rock the scorpion guarded was one that fit the criteria of both C-grades and those wanting to evolve being able to use it, according to his worm buddy. It was also one that no other worms dared go for due to the scorpions guarding it. Jake considered it for a moment before agreeing,

"*Fine. Tell me everything you know about them,*" Jake answered as he at least wanted to go in with information.

While Jake had not lost his "fight" with Ell'Hakan because he was weaker, being stronger would potentially have allowed him to avoid getting thrown away entirely. No concept or advanced magic truly mattered before supreme power. If Jake had been a C-grade and just released a massive wave of destructive arcane mana, he would have broken any spell Ell'Hakan could ever conjure up.

Also... Jake still wanted levels, and doing some killing would surely do him good. He felt like he needed it too. Besides, he had the excuse of helping out the worm that was already helping him and the worm even mentioned this way would be faster. Did the worm specify how much faster or how much of a detour it would be? No, not at all. And he didn't ask either.

"Okay! So, the scorpions are not that large, only a few times bigger than you, and the most dangerous part is their stinger. The pinchers look dangerous, but they aren't actually that bad as they can't really grab our skin... oh, but they could probably cut off your small parts. So also watch out for those. To make it worse is that their skin is not really skin but more like rock, and..."

Jake listened along as he considered if maybe fighting them wouldn't just be a quicker way to find out as, quite frankly, they just sounded like normal scorpions. Massive scorpions, but still scorpions.

Soon to be dead scorpions.

Caleb sat before the man that he knew had been the impetus of this entire conflict. Why the hell he had asked for a meeting was beyond him, but Caleb had agreed nonetheless. As the Judge of the Court of Shadows in this branch, he was obligated to. The reason was that the leader of the United Cities Alliance had not come to invade the Court. He had not even necessarily asked Caleb to meet.

He had simply approached them as a client.

Arthur sat across from Caleb in a small tent constructed between the group from the United Cities Alliance and Skyggen. Both had men stationed nearby, but Caleb wanted to avoid a fight if necessary. He had to admit that looking at Arthur, he wasn't sure if he could kill him. Not because he was strong or anything but due to the many items he possessed. Not that Caleb would let that show as he confidently spoke.

"I find it brave for you to meet me under four eyes like this," Caleb said.

"Why?" Arthur asked. "I am not meeting Caleb Thayne, the brother of the Malefic Viper's Chosen, but the Judge of the Court of Shadows. I am here as a client looking to hire the Court. Nothing more, nothing less."

"And yet you show up with an army," Caleb said a bit mockingly.

"I had to gauge the response. Let me make it clear right now, I feel for you, but your brother is not the man you once thought he was. I am sure you are aware of what the Order of the Malefic Viper is. It is an organization that is not about working together and prosperity but one of domination and death. Recently, after their Patron returned, what did they do to strengthen themselves? They forced every other faction on the planet that the Order was placed on to submit or die. Those who refused they slaughtered or

enslaved. While you may hold the belief that your brother is not a person who would do that, I do not. I look at a history spanning trillion of years and see a pattern," Arthur said.

Caleb fell silent for a moment before answering. "I do not contest that the Order of the Malefic Viper has unpleasant means, but for there to be any conquest, there must be intent. Jake has absolutely no interest in taking control of this planet. He would rather have someone else become the World Leader than manage any of it himself. He is a fighter and a hunter through and through."

"As long as he remains, no other faction can gain control as he will always be here. Always hold influence. Even if he truly does not care, it doesn't mean others won't. Being the Chosen, there will be significant interest in our planet once they are aware he is from here. His lack of interest will only fuel their desire to take over our world if just to say they did. But let me concur for a moment that Jake Thayne is no threat. He is not the only reason for this. Can you say that others will not try to dominate our world? The Risen? Or, worse yet, the Holy Church?" Arthur asked.

"I don't know them that well," Caleb confessed. "The Risen, that is. The Holy Church will try to take over the planet; that is something I have no doubt in my mind about. It has been their MO since the very first Era. Which leads me to... isn't Jacob your son? You know, the leader of the Holy Church on Earth? Are you willing to kill your own son for fear of losing control of... what, a piece of rock floating in space?"

"Jacob is a prime example of what is wrong with these ideologies spawned from religion. He is now nothing more than a puppet. But you are right. Even if I got the opportunity, I could never bring myself to kill my own son, which is why I made sure he was not on the planet when all of this began. He is just a cog in the machine, and the Holy Church will gladly make use of him by just deploying him elsewhere. I hope he finds peace but never returns," Arthur explained.

Caleb listened along, not even aware that Jacob was off the planet. It kind of made sense based on the recent movements of the Church. Even so... Caleb still wasn't certain what the man wanted of him. "You still haven't said what you mean by coming here as a client." Follow current novels on *novel*◇*fire*◇*net*

Arthur smiled and took out a piece of paper. "I want to clarify that it is not that I despise all organizations run by gods. I would actually argue it makes sense in this world to have the highest echelon be made up of gods. My problem is with the religious aspects. The missions of these gods. The Court of Shadows is more a business than organized religion, and you operate not based on faith but a far more understandable concept: money. I am here to hire the Court of Shadows to assist the United Cities Alliance in our mission to take control of this planet by having you get rid of certain problematic characters that will stand in our way come voting for World Leader."

He handed Caleb the paper, which turned out to be a list, and Caleb took it almost instinctively. He skimmed some of the names but recognized only a scarce few as City

Lords belonging to the Holy Church and City Lords who had refused to join any other faction. Notably absent was anyone Caleb actually knew.

"As I mentioned, then I understand. Even if this is all business, we are still humans. Asking you to hunt your own family or friends is something I know you couldn't do, even if it conflicts with the mission of the Court," Arthur said apologetically.

"But you still want me to assist you. You, who have allied with someone intending to kill my brother," Caleb said.

Arthur raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Kill? No, no. Killing Jake Thayne would be utterly moronic. I am not willing to gamble on someone from the Order of the Malefic Viper not suddenly deciding to pay us a visit in a century and blow up the planet just for slighting their god. But force him to abandon the planet? Now that is a whole other story. Now, if Ell'Hakan does manage to somehow slay him, I do not see it necessarily leading back to us but to him. This would not be my ideal outcome, but an acceptable one"

Caleb considered it for a moment and could see Jake just leave Earth altogether if he could no longer find a good reason to stay. He had already gone to the Order several times. There was still one problem, though: "Bold plan that still does not address the elephant in the room: Ell'Hakan."

"A means to an end. His intentions and mine are aligned in this, and he and his comrades will get what they want without it impacting humanity too negatively in the long run. There truly is no need to worry about Ell'Hakan. Don't think I allied with him out of desperation. Everything is in a system-enforced contract, and so far, he has stuck to the plan," Arthur said with little concern.

Caleb sighed, not believing Arthur had even a tenth as much control of the situation as he believed. "Let's say you succeed in forcing Jake off the planet, and your alien helper sticks to all his promises and leaves too once all this is done. What stops Jake from just coming back in the future? What stops the Order from still wanting to claim it?"

Arthur smiled confidently. "I do recognize that the multiverse is not a place where some fledgling faction can just emerge on its own without finding itself conquered. So I have found an ally. An ally that does not care about conquering the Earth and one with its Origin in humanity."

It took him a moment to figure it out as Caleb frowned. "Why the hell would they agree to that..."

"All want a foothold, and I offered them good terms. As long as I become World Leader, our deal stands," Arthur explained. "And Valhal is more than welcoming of any outside forces wishing to invade their land. Be it the Holy Church or the Order of the Malefic Viper."

Caleb frowned even deeper. He wanted to protest, but just then, he felt a prickle for the first time in a while. A divine message. As he heard the words, his eyes opened even wider than before as he gritted his teeth.

"As the Judge of the Court of Shadows, I accept your contract... but we are increasing the fee. Significantly," Caleb said with annoyance.

"If there is anything we do not lack, it is Credits," Arthur answered as he extended his hand for a shake. "May this be the start of a great working relationship."

Caleb looked at the hand before swatting it away. "I have no interest in any kind of relationship, professional or not. You are making a huge fucking mistake, and it will come back to bite you in the ass. The only reason I am accepting the contract is because I am the Judge. Being nice about it isn't in the job description."

Not seeming offended in the least, Arthur simply nodded. "Sometimes, we must do business we are not particularly fond of. Accept losses and do things we are not proud of in the moment, but that will lead to a greater future. That is what true leadership is about. I thank you for meeting me here today, Judge of the Court of Shadows. Be it with your blessing or not, I wish you luck in your task, and I genuinely do hope for a fortuitous future. For all of us."

With those words, Arthur took his leave as Caleb was left with a long list of names. He took out a special token and checked, only to quickly see that a contract had indeed been signed, not by him, but by another Judge of the Court of Shadows. One not even in their fucking universe. All with the approval of Umbra.

"Fuck me," Caleb sighed as he stood up and went back towards Skyggen. Sometimes it really sucked to be a for-hire guild of assassins.

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

Chapter 526: Painting the Desert Blue

Factions in the multiverse varied widely. Some factions integrated themselves nearly everywhere quite easily, such as the Court of Shadows. The Court of Shadows found themselves present even in territory and planets run by the Holy Church as long as they kept themselves covert. It was an unspoken agreement that the two factions had agreed upon for many eras and allowed the Church to get rid of individuals they would prefer not to send members after themselves. Let's just say there were many circumstances where having assassins for hire was just more convenient.

Valhal was also the sort of place that could have "halls" or small groups operate within other's territories without dominating land themselves. They did occupy some land – unlike the Court of Shadows, where none knew the true location of their headquarters – but not as much as others. The reason for this was simple.

One could be born into the Holy Church. Born into the Risen. Born into the Altmar Empire. But this was not true for Valhal, the Court of Shadows, or the Order of the Malefic Viper for that part. One could have an easier way in, but that did not mean one was born into it. They were organizations that people could join and leave, closer to companies or guilds than empires and countries. Granted, their member contracts could be limiting, but there was always a way out.

Most organizations were also reasonable to some extent. They respected some universal rules set in the multiverse. But... some organizations could not truly be classified. One, in particular, stood out largely due to its power.

Ell'Hakan had been warned that in Haven, there was one person he was not to interfere with no matter what. One person he should even actively make sure the United Cities Alliance did not bother either.

Because some factions were what could only be classified as utterly insane. Usually, factions like these would crumble and break apart as insanity was not a good attribute for a leader to have, but there was one major organization in the multiverse that, despite its insane methods, managed to thrive.

An organization that had wiped out entire species for looking too much like one of the gods they prayed to. One that willingly had its members go to the domains or sacred sites of their gods despite half dying in the process. One that would be crazy enough to start a war in which trillions would die and swear an eternal blood oath to wipe out you and anyone with a karmic connection to you from the multiverse... over a statue. A work-in-progress statue.

It was naturally the Primordial Church. And the one person Ell'Hakan had been warned about was none other than Felix, the sculptor who was apparently working on a statue of the Malefic Viper - a statue shown by the Chosen himself. This mattered particularly much because the Chosen had, according to rumors, been the first person to see the Viper in Eras. This meant that in the eyes of the Eternal Servant, the Chosen was the only one who had truly "seen" the Malefic One as he had met him both before and after he returned.

Ell'Hakan had been told all this directly by his Patron after the Eternal Servant himself had come to warn him. Warn him that the sculptor was to remain undisturbed until his task was complete. The Nahoom had not known what to think about this as he had honestly not even heard about this sculptor before arriving on Earth. In fact, he had been on his way to meet someone he had heard about and taken a particular interest in.

A certain man of technology by the name of Arnold.

A common misunderstanding was that spiders are insects. They weren't but were instead distant relatives of insects, being classified as arachnids. Another common misunderstanding was that scorpions were insects, but they were arachnids and far closer related to spiders than something like an ant.

On second thought, most people probably did know this, but Jake didn't. At least not the second part about scorpions being arachnids.

Post-system, these things were often mixed together, and these classifications kind of stopped mattering, but it was fun trivia nonetheless. One difference also did remain in the number of legs. Like spiders, scorpions had eight of them, and like spiders, these legs were honestly kind of weak and their joints rather exposed.

Jake leaped backward as he dodged the incredibly fast stinger aiming for him, quickly gaining distance from his large foe.

The scorpion had a sand-colored body, and its stinger stood more than twenty meters tall. It was an utterly monstrously large body, and the pincers were large enough to snap a human in half if caught. Several humans at once, probably.

Plating covered its entire body, making it look like an invulnerable tank, and Jake did indeed discover that trying to damage its armored parts was useless, with even his Powershot blocked and only leaving a nick. Now, for the far smaller scorpions, Jake could still blow them apart, but the C-grade in question was the real deal.

[Giant Sandstream Scorpion Lord – lvl ???]

Jake slid back across the sand after dodging another attack and heard the cheerleading voice of the worm in the back of his head, despite it hiding several hundred meters down and kilometers away. Yes, these worms had a very impressive range when it came to their telepathy, and no, it did not want to contribute to the fight at all. Not like it needed to.

Throughout the battle, he had landed dozens of stabs with his katars, and it wasn't hard to hit the gaps between the armor with the occasional arrow. Their fight had been going on for a good while by now, and the difference was quite clear, even if there were some issues. The link to the origin of this information rests in novel•fire•net

Streams of sand – probably what gave the massive scorpion its name – whirled around the scorpion and gathered as spear-like weapons that stabbed forward to try and catch out Jake. He easily dodged backward and took to the air as he bombarded the scorpion below with stable arcane arrows.

The scorpion angled itself to block with its chitin armor and formed a dome of sand around itself to stop his attacks while it tried to heal itself of some of the poison in its body. Jake smirked and simply began charging Arcane Powershot, having already seen the scorpion's lack of ability to block it with its sand magic.

As expected, it penetrated the wall of sand and struck the scorpion in the stinger, making it screech in pain as even more poison was delivered into its system. Now, Jake mentioned issues, and one issue was that he had wasted an entire bottle of his special soul poison.

Turns out that it sucked against large foes due to the far larger Soulshape, and the scorpion also had significant innate poison resistance. Enough for him to not be able to build up a proper charge before triggering it. This is why he had just returned back to hemotoxins to at least make it bleed a bit more. Oh, another funny fact was that scorpions had blue blood. This had no impact on the fight besides the sand taking on a new color. It was just a bit of trivia.

Thinking about it, this was Jake's third time fighting a C-grade. The first had been the Phantomshade Panther and the second the mushroom man he obliterated together with Draskil. No, he didn't count the termites. And as the fight with the scorpion continued, it became clear this specimen was weaker than both of the C-grades he had truly faced before.

Moreover, Jake was stronger than he had been then. To add further, then the scorpion was not that well matched up against Jake due to his ranged options. It seemed that these scorpions nearly only fought melee foes, and those they fought with ranged options, their sand magic could face. He had noticed a distinct lack of flying creatures anywhere in the desert, but that was likely due to the one-sided nature of the environment. Birds with the earth affinity were super rare for hopefully obvious reasons.

So just flying around and keeping his distance allowed Jake to whittle down the massive scorpion a little at a time. Still, it wasn't entirely one-sided and definitely not a fast fight.

Jake shot a barrage of explosive arrows as the scorpion had dispelled its wall of sand and moved to attack. The stinger struck forward and penetrated into the sand Jake had just been flying above. A black liquid was excreted that somehow pulsed through the sand, and Jake felt it continue through it to hit anything hiding below ground.

All he had to do to avoid it was not touch the sand, making Jake never stay on the ground. It was also smart to not stand on it as it gave him more time to dodge the sand manipulation.

The scorpion wasn't stupid – no C-grades were – and knew it was in a very disadvantageous situation. After Jake managed to blow one of its legs off, the scorpion decided it was time to leave as it attempted to dig into the sand and get away.

Jake reacted quickly and did something many would probably find incredibly wasteful. Flying down, Jake smashed both his fists into the ground as he released massive amounts of stable arcane mana into the sand. The scorpion tried to manipulate the sand but found itself unable to move it as Jake had effectively frozen the ground with pure stability. This did not mean the scorpion couldn't use sand anymore, as it was able to summon it out of thin air, but it sure as hell wasn't going to dig anywhere.

Also realizing that Jake was faster, it chose to stand its ground as it finally went all out. Its entire body suddenly began shaking as Jake saw parts of it turn into sand. Jake frowned as the stinger seemed to disintegrate and simply become one with the desert below. Soon after, its pinchers followed.

His danger sense exploded as Jake jumped, only to barely avoid a stinger emerging. A stream of sand went towards him, and he dodged out of the way, only for a pincher to pop out of the sand flying in mid-air.

Looking down, he saw the scorpion's stinger, and both claws were entirely gone as it just looked like just a big mound of armor, its joints also gone. Yet it still moved its amputated limbs, and in tandem, these limbs were summoned from any sand all around Jake.

It was actually a really cool trick and probably how it had hunted down so many worms who dared enter its area. Too bad its sneak attacks didn't work on Jake as sneak attacks tended to not work on Jake.

Deciding to finish the fight, Jake dove down towards the main body of the scorpion, dodging all attacks on the way. Arrows didn't do the job as its armor seemed even stronger in this form, leaving not a single opening. All it had were a few stumps sticking out, which were also covered in armor, making it like trying to hit a safe.

Jake had a way around that as he landed on the scorpion and pressed his hands to its body. Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, and the poison went straight into the armor and began corroding it. Dark green cracks appeared within seconds, and Jake felt it turn brittle enough for a good punch to break it.

To the scorpion's credit, it also swiftly reacted in a way that Jake had not expected. Sand appeared on both sides as two massive pinchers appeared and tried to rip Jake off, making him dodge under them and smirk as he kept pumping in poison. The stinger then regrew instantly, but not on the tail as expected but out of the damn armor right behind Jake. It was a far smaller version of it, but it also moved faster than Jake was ready for.

He was hit on the back as the stinger pumped deadly venom into him. Jake reacted by pumping more poison into the scorpion. While Jake found his poison relatively ineffective at actually doing damage to the scorpion, the C-grade also quickly discovered it had little luck.

Jake did have to admit that the venom was stronger than anything he could make as his skin turned black and his insides began turning to mush. Emphasis on began. Nearly all other D-grades, even peak D-grades, would find themselves turned into piles of goo within a second of being struck with the stinger. It was a true kill-move that sadly relied on something Jake was very resistant to.

Both of them pumped toxins into the other for several more seconds before Jake had to disengage. Eternal Hunger – in its katar form – was summoned as he punched straight down. It penetrated the armor of the scorpion after it had been weakened and made cracks spread. Several more hits shattered a huge part of the armor as Jake finally cut off the stinger and took to the air.

The scorpion tried to roll over and protect its newly-made weak point, but Jake was not having any of it. He used Gaze of the Apex Hunter as a large arrow appeared from his quiver. One he had been saving for this moment. It was naturally Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

Frozen, the scorpion could not move in time as Jake shot down the arrow. It hit right in the weak spot and sank into the scorpion's body, creating an even bigger hole and sending out an intense wave of energy that ravaged its insides. Jake followed up with a few explosive arcane arrows that hit inside the hole and hence exploded inside the scorpion's body.

It struggled and writhed in pain, but it was too late. Jake activated Mark of the Avaricious Hunter as the scorpion flashed with arcane light for a brief second, making it screech out in pain more. All it took after that was a few more well-placed arrows and a bit of time.

A minute later, the building-sized scorpion finally collapsed on the sand as Jake got a notification.

****You have slain [Giant Sandstream Scorpion Lord – lvl 202] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

*****DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 174 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

He didn't know if he should be annoyed or not at only getting a single level from a kill on a damn C-grade. Then again, it had only been a good half an hour's work. A bit longer if you also counted the forty or so D-grades, Jake had to kill before he faced the Scorpion Lord, but he barely counted those due to how easy they were.

Sitting down on the sand, Jake took out a health potion and quickly drank it as he closed his eyes and focused on eliminating the venom still in his body. It would take a while, and during the process, he had to keep Arcane Awakening active, so he was in a

bit of a hurry. He had not taken that much damage during the fight itself besides the last attack, but he was still tired as hell and would need some rest.

Focusing while in meditation, Jake practiced actively using Palate to eliminate the poison in his body as he waited for a certain worm to be brave enough to come over.

Minutes passed as Jake stabilized himself enough to move properly. He had still taken immense internal damage from that last stinger attack and felt like it would probably take a few hours before he was back in peak condition.

"You did it!" he heard the happy voice of the worm say from afar. Jake had also finally stopped tuning the worm out, as it had constantly been bombarding him with: "Watch out!" and "Hit now!" and... well, that kind of thing. He had never had a backseat warrior while fighting before, and he would prefer to never ever have one again.

"That I did," Jake answered. He already felt the worm move closer, making Jake also head to their target.

A large stone was standing there in the middle of the desert. Somehow it stood upright and looked like a tall, slender boulder that someone had placed there. On it was a few natural markings, and it did give off an intense amount of earth affinity energy as well as something else Jake could not quite recognize, even if it did feel like a familiar concept. Jake had no idea what it was, but he could see why the worm wanted it.

"Now that the Scorpion Lord is dead, you got all you wanted, and we can move on?" Jake asked.

"Well... about that..." the worm began, embarrassed.

"There is more than one C-grade scorpion, isn't there?"

"Maaybe? A few?"

"And more stones too?" Jake asked with a sigh.

"Now, that would be a happy coincidence... imagine if there were several of these stones which were kind of maybe linked or something, and getting all of them would be super good or something like that. That would be crazy."

"Are you still trying to claim this way is faster?" Jake asked with exasperation but also had to admit he found the entire situation amusing. He had planned to take advantage of the worm to transport him, and there he was working as a mercenary for his driver.

"Well, that depends... C-grades are a lot faster than D-grades, you know? And I am sure I would be super fast if I somehow happened to reach C-grade, which would

definitely speed up the journey, and to do that... you know, you can kill scorpions, and I can eat stones. Seems like a perfect fit," the worm argued.

Jake just closed his eyes, tilted his head, and stared at the sky above.

Guess I am painting the desert blue with scorpion blood.

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

Chapter 527: A Sandy Sand Worm

After the initial panic from having the entire teleportation network destroyed, things in the many cities across Earth were pretty calm again for a while. Most didn't even know why the attack had happened, and those who did quickly moved to apprehend those responsible or to calm the masses. The cities belonging to the United Cities Alliance also willingly destroyed their own teleporters to sabotage the forces of Earth after making sure that they were ready internally.

Food had been stocked up if they still needed that, and defenses had been strengthened. They also had enough materials stocked up for their crafters to tide over the coming conflict. In time the teleportation network would be re-established, so they just had to wait.

One of the issues the teleportation network had helped address was the beasts and other monsters attacking settlements, but that wasn't really that big an issue anymore. The beasts had been united by stronger alphas, and large groups had been formed, none of which attacked human settlements. Especially not after the last World Congress, where they had voted on the Unusual Unions Path, which had resulted in many people evolving into classes that worked well with beasts or professions that could make things beasts wanted. This had even formed diplomatic relationships between many cities and beast hordes as they had begun to be called.

All of this is to say that the only beasts who bothered cities were solitary ones or smaller packs. Sometimes natural phenomena also spawned elementals or the like that attacked cities, but nothing large or organized. There were also many D-grades around by now, and even the weakest cities had a few. This is why what came next was a massive surprise to many.

A guard stood bored in a tall watchtower and looked all around. He hadn't seen anything try to attack for over a month, and his only real job these days was to report whenever caravans or something, anything, approached. He had thought that with the

destruction of the teleporters, he would have more work, but that clearly wasn't the case. Not that no work wasn't good. They were just a small settlement who were lucky to have a Pylon with about four thousand people living there, of which only five were D-grade. So nothing was probably the best outcome.

As he stretched a bit and looked to the side, he saw some dust being kicked up. The land was dry all around, and he wondered if it was another dust storm. Those could be nasty and sometimes even had a few elementals in them.

Yet as he saw it come closer, he froze. A massive form emerged from the dust cloud, tens of meters tall. It looked like a massive moose and was no doubt well in the D-grade. Behind it, hundreds of smaller beasts were revealed, all charging with their leader. All of these were E-grades, but some D-grades were also there. The guard doubted his eyes for several moments before he collected himself and yelled: "Attack! We're under attack!"

With slight panic, he sounded all the alarms as the town went into lockdown. The D-grades present, who had simply been working on their professions, hurried out, and the City Lord rushed up the watch tower. Standing beside the guard, he stared out and also saw the beasts.

"Get everyone ready," the City Lord said with fear as he gritted his teeth.

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Similar scenes played out all over the planet. No beast tides had been seen for many months, but now they had suddenly restarted. The fragile peace that had been established by the most powerful monsters crumbled in seconds as if a spark had been lit.

Or, more accurately, like what had been holding them back had disappeared.

Thousands of cities suddenly found themselves unprepared after having relaxed their defenses following the last World Congress. Armies of elementals, tides of beasts, and other monsters took advantage of the stockpiles of resources in all these cities. Their attacks were indiscriminatory and went for every faction. The Holy Church, Noboru Clan, United Cities Alliance, or completely unaffiliated factions or individual cities found themselves under assault.

Nobody seemed to know the trigger for this, and quite frankly, most didn't have time to care. All they knew was that the monsters humanity had finally begun to soften up to suddenly did a one-eighty and once more viewed human settlements as nothing more than food and experience sources.

Jake didn't know why it kept happening... okay, he did know; he just felt a bit weird about it. Why was it that whenever Jake entered a new area with a new type of monster, it turned into Jake effectively committing genocide?

The worm was happy, sure, and Jake wasn't that sad about it as they still made good progress. Both in levels and distance. All the Scorpion Lords were of roughly equal strength, and what little variance they did have wasn't of any consequence as Jake grew stronger and more accustomed to them between every kill. Moreover, after the first kill, Jake was familiar enough with the scorpions to open every fight with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, instantly giving him an advantage.

There ended up being a total of nine stones and nine C-grade Scorpion Lords. Along with the hundreds of high and peak tier D-grades Jake also ended up killing, he had truly done a number on the local scorpion population. In some ways, he had been lucky to stumble across so many weak C-grades to hunt. They were barely evolved, he was a good matchup, plus they were weak for their grade.

This hunting spree had also naturally led to quite a few levels gained.

*****DING! Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 175 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 179 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

*****DING! Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 176 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 177 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 180 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

*****DING! Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 178 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

As always, his leveling speed slowed down the more of the same enemies he killed, and the fights got easier. But it was inarguable that hunting C-grades was way, way more effective than D-grades. Not once had he gained a level after a D-grade kill despite killing hundreds, and every level came after a C-grade.

Now, finally, they had the stones the worm wanted. Jake had taken the second they came across for himself temporarily as he had eaten it with Palate of the Malefic Viper to get an idea of what they were and how they worked. He had it eaten for around six

days before they reached the final rock, and during this time, Jake got some idea of what they were.

Meteorites.

The concept he had felt from them was some kind of space affinity or maybe astral affinity. Gravity affinity? A mix of it all, probably. Either way, they contained powerful energies. Jake could likely find some ways to use the meteors himself, but it would take a lot of work, and he had already promised the worm.

The entire hunt had only taken roughly a week, during which they made it a few thousand kilometers into the scorpion territory. Each of the stones was above five meters tall and one and a half meters across, making them small enough for Jake to store in his spatial storage. The worm had made it clear that all of them had to be gathered before eating.

Standing before the final stone with a dead Scorpion Lord in the background, Jake turned to the very excited worm. It had only popped out the top parts of its body, making it look like a hill had just emerged next to Jake with the worm's mouth closed.

"So, here we are," Jake said as he stood in front of the meteorite.

"Yep..." the worm said a bit nervously.

"Relax, I am not going to take your meteorites. I feel these were once part of one large meteorite and broke part when they entered our atmosphere. Or maybe something else broke them," Jake shared his observations and some insight from Palate.

"Yeah, one of the big worms said that these stones were once united, and to bring out their full power, one had to bring them together again. The scorpions were just dumb and didn't like each other, so they never shared. Not like the stones aren't good individually, just best together," the worm answered.

They had spoken only a bit over this last week, but it was mainly about random unrelated topics and for Jake to learn about worms. Jake had spent most of his time meditating and trying to figure out how to upgrade Wings of the Malefic Viper between recovering between fights, leaving not enough time to have any long talks.

"I have been thinking," Jake asked. *"Do worms have genders?"*

He knew that earthworms pre-system were hermaphrodites, and he had been wondering if maybe these worms were too.

"Worms are worms," the worm answered very accurately. *"Ah, but the big ones can decide, I heard. They got a skill to change shape or something and using that skill, they*

kind of make a preferred form that can have a sex. Not sure why they would. Do humans have genders? Wait, let me guess, they do, and you are a... female?"

"Missed the fifty-fifty," Jake chuckled.

"Really? I thought you had to be a female due to your mushy and soft form. Males are meant to look strong and rough, right?" the worm asked. The words sounded a bit insulting, but Jake felt not the slightest amount of mockery in the tone, just genuine curiosity.

"Females are even mushier and softer," Jake answered, feeling a bit weird about saying that out loud. Telepathically. Wanting to change the topic, he asked something else. *"I don't think I ever got a name either. What do other worms call you?"*

"What?" the worm asked, even more confused.

"You know, a name. A way to identify who you are and differentiate you from other worms," Jake clarified.

"I am a Sand Worm," the worm asked before it seemed to get it. *"Wait... oh, I think I get it! Like, what we call stuff we find or something? A made-up term, umm, name?"*

"Exactly!" Jake said, glad he got through.

"We don't have those. Seems kind of dumb; why do you need them? Any worm can differentiate another worm in the network, and our soul signatures are entirely unique, so if we want to mention a specific worm, we just relay their soul signature. Way better than names, I think," the worm explained.

"I... that is actually super fucking smart," Jake admitted as he thought about it. He could identify people using only their mana signature, which was part of their soul signature and was utterly unique. If the worms could relay this signature using telepathy and only spoke using telepathy, then why the hell would they need names? At least not between them. They only had to give names to dead objects and Identify provided ones for free just by using the skill.

"Right?" the worm said happily.

"But I still want you to have one," Jake stated.

"Why?"

"For when I meet other people in the future, and for my own internal thoughts, I want to have a name to refer to you as," Jake explained.

"Humans are weird. Do all humans have names? What is your name?" the worm asked.

"My name is Jake, and yes, all humans have names. At least all humans I know," he answered.

"Oh... so does that mean I should call you human Jake? Or, wait, are you a Jake and not a human then? Like, my Identify does not work on you, and is that because you are a Jake? And are there more Jakes out there like you?" the worm asked, clearly not entirely getting the concept of names.

"No, no. There is only one of me, and Jake is nothing but a name. I am a human, and my name has nothing to do with my strength or anything; it is just something my parents gave me. That is how names work. They are given by someone close to you, most likely your parents, and then you have that name until you die or decide to change it," Jake tried to explain.

"So I could just get a name if I wanted? Just by saying I am suddenly supposed to be called something else and not Sand Worm?" the worm asked very interestedly.

"Yes," Jake said.

"What should I pick then... how about Super Sand Worm? Or maybe Best Sand Worm? Oh, I know, Awesome Sand Worm!" the massive worm spoke out loud as Jake saw the mound that stuck out of the ground wriggle slightly. The source of this content is *novel·fire·net*

"... maybe think about it a bit more after you have heard other names to get an idea?" Jake asked with exasperation.

"Are my ideas bad? Oh well. Wait, you said that names are given, right? Can't you just give me one?" the worm asked.

"I am not sure that would be a good idea. I have repeatedly been told that I am bad at giving names," Jake tried to argue.

"So you have given names before! That must mean you are experienced at it. Just give me one then," the worm said. *"But after you give me a name, can you let me have the tasty rocks? You said that people give names to those they care about, so if you give me a name, it must also mean you care about me, right? Or doesn't it work both ways?"*

Jake felt like there were several leaps in logic with that argument but didn't bother trying to correct it. Instead, he thought of a name. The first thing that sprung to mind was Wormie, but his vast experience of naming things made him know he was not allowed to do that. Not anymore.

He also knew it had to be a unisex name. Thinking long and hard on the issue, Jake took inspiration from the environment and the worm in front of him as he settled on a

perfect name. A name that was actually a real name, a historically unisex name, and a name that would truly fit the worm in his eyes.

“Let’s just call you Sandy,” Jake said with pride. Truly his naming sense had improved by leaps and bounds since the day he named Hawkie.

“Doesn’t sandy mean that something is made of sand or is like sand? I am pretty sure it is. Like, this place is sandy,” the worm asked, confused.

“Ah, but it is also a name,” Jake said. *“And even so, aren’t you kind of sandy? So it even helps describe you, doesn’t it?”*

“Hm, I am sandy... okay! I am Sandy from now on. Hello human Jake, I am worm Sandy!” the worm, now named Sandy, greeted him as he heard something akin to a giggle. *“He he, this is weird. Sandy, Sandy, Sandy... what happens if I forget it, though?”*

“I will remember it for you,” Jake assured the cutely nervous worm. *“Now for the true bounty. Are you ready for your stones?”*

“Yep!” the worm said expectedly. *“Sandy is ready!”*

Sandy had managed to reach level 199 over this last week primarily by stealing things from the dead scorpions, and Jake had a strong feeling it was ready for evolution. Sandy was also certain it was ready to evolve, and the meteorites certainly weren’t ordinary items.

Jake took out the meteorites from his inventory, and the moment he did, they flew towards each other right in front of him. Jake was sent scrambling back as a loud crack was heard, and the meteorites merged into each other. Taking precautions, Jake stepped back the moment he took out the final meteorite from Palate, but luckily it simply flew to the larger one and merged with it.

The second all the meteorites were gathered, a pulse was sent out, and the entire area seemed to shake. Jake was curious and walked closer to it, feeling pulled as he got closer.

“You won’t take it?” Sandy asked nervously.

“No...” Jake answered. *“But give me a second.”*

“Hurry! I can already feel that others are coming,” the worm warned.

Jake nodded as he placed his hand on the meteorite. It felt hot to the touch, and it was as if his hand stuck to it. He wouldn’t say he felt connected to it, but he did feel a call of

sorts. He now realized the meteorite didn't only feel familiar due to the affinities of energy. There was something else. Something that resonated with him.

Closing his eyes, Jake activated Touch of the Malefic Viper almost instinctively as he sent some of his energy into the meteorite to connect with his energy. He wanted to make it better, and he felt part of himself be drained. Like in a trance, he infused it with energy until a distinct sense of weakness overtook his body.

He fell to his knees as he was knocked out of his trance and checked his resources in horror.

Status

Mana Points (MP): 249 /102437

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What the fuck did I just do? Jake asked himself.

"What did you just do?" the worm also asked him.

"I am not sure," Jake said with furrowed brows. *"But hurry up."*

"Okay!" Sandy said as it dove underground for a moment before emerging right in front of Jake, swallowing the meteorite whole. It had not grown despite them merging but had turned into a darker color.

Jake tried to stabilize himself and looked as Sandy froze. Minutes passed, and Jake quickly took out a mana potion to at least be able to stand up properly and look intimidating if other beasts came. It was good that the corpse was still near, and Jake could pose until Sandy was ready.

"So?" Jake asked the worm after it seemed frozen for over five minutes.

Another minute passed before Sandy's entire body shook.

"Be right back!"

With that, the entire Sand Worm disappeared, leaving a large hole in the ground that rapidly began to get filled with sand again. Sandy was entirely gone, having no-doubt gone to that special evolution place.

And not even Villy knew what Sandy would return as.

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

- Chapter 528: A Whole New Worm

Chapter 528: A Whole New Worm

Jake waited expectedly for Sandy to return. As he waited, he also considered an option he hadn't even thought of before... what if Sandy turned hostile? There was a legitimate risk that the worm would return stronger than Jake was as the evolution could lead to intense power growth. No, it would definitely lead to immense power growth.

Moreover, Sandy didn't need him anymore. He had helped the worm reach C-grade and even went and did something incredibly stupid like pour all his mana into the damn meteorite. Oh, and then there was the issue of C-grades apparently coming, and as he stood there, Jake could even feel a few approaching auras.

Did I fuck up badly? Jake asked himself.

He had originally only approached the worm to give him a lift. Their entire relationship had been transactional. Shit, Jake had even threatened Sandy. He knew that if someone else had threatened him to either help or die, Jake would have fought or at the very least looked for every opportunity possible to strike back.

Feeling genuinely nervous, Jake considered just taking off on his own. He was damn low on mana and didn't wanna fight any C-grades showing up, so leaving would probably be safer. Logically, he should leave or at least hide.

Yet he stayed there, waiting. Because despite his worries, he had a good feeling about Sandy. Sandy seemed like a decent worm, and unless Ell'Hakan could somehow mess with Jake's emotions across the planet, he felt confident in that assessment. Not that he would have time to get away as Sandy was back.

A figure appeared, slowly fading into existence. Instantly, Jake noticed the difference. First of all, Sandy's body had actually grown a little smaller, now "only" about a hundred meters long. The body was also less bulky, with the entire form quite slender. Color-wise, Sandy had taken on an odd black-purple hue with the occasional small glimmering dot here and there, looking like small diamonds were embedded in the skin. The skin itself also looked far tougher than before, now more like rock than simply very rough skin.

But what struck Jake the most was the aura. He felt as if the area around Sandy was bending slightly and looked off, and he saw some of the sand slowly begin to float up towards the worm. Sandy noticed and stopped attracting it and began to twist and turn to check out its own body. Another difference was that all of this took place up in the air, Sandy moving as if somehow still "swimming."

Jake used Identify on Sandy, trying to get a feeling for what he was dealing with.

[Juvenile Cosmic Genesis Worm – lvl ???]

Jake stared at the name, not at all sure what to make of it. First of all, it was long. Were long names good? Probably. But more than the number of words were the words used. Cosmic and Genesis were both words that certainly held a lot of “power,” and the juvenile part hinted that a fully grown Cosmic Genesis Worm had to be at least B-grade. Those trying to become dragons became true dragons at B-grade, indicating that a Cosmic Genesis Worm was likely at or around the level of a true dragon.

And true dragons were damn strong.

“Hey, Sandy. You well?” Jake asked as he saw Sandy keep twisting and turning.

“It looks funny when it moves,” Sandy answered in a very amused tone.

Jake looked confused around and saw nothing move besides the giant worm as he asked again.

“What does?”

“The air sand. Umm... just a bit, checking the skill... hmm, cosmic dust it calls it. And sand is pretty much dust, right? You can't see it? It is everywhere, even all around you, right now. Look, like this,” Sandy said.

As Sandy said this, Jake faintly felt space around him faintly begin to harden as if it became denser. He wrapped his hand in destructive arcane mana and swept it sideways as he destroyed whatever Sandy was doing.

“You can see it! Or maybe feel it? Hm, weird. Anywho, what did you do with the meteorite before? The amount of earth affinity was near-eliminated, and some foreign concept I am not familiar with was just overflowing. Ah, don't get me wrong, I am not complaining or anything. I am way better now. Oh, did you know I had five evolution options, and only two of them didn't have sand in the name? Also! Who is the Malefic Viper?” Sandy asked with rapid-fire telepathy.

Jake couldn't help but just smile a bit. He had to admit that Sandy felt strong now, but Jake didn't feel the slightest hint of danger. It wasn't necessarily because the newly born Cosmic Genesis Worm couldn't threaten him, but there was not a hint of animosity. All he felt was relief at Sandy not changing.

He answered her questions, explaining who Villy was in quick terms, and was glad that Sandy knew what gods were as apparently a few worms had been blessed. As for why Sandy asked... some-fucking-how, an option called “Malefic Transport Worm” had appeared, and it was better than any of the three “expected” evolutions. The description

had talked about turning Sandy into a living transportation vehicle or some shit like that, and thank fucking Villy Sandy had not picked that.

“Cool, so you are the Chosen best friend of this god? Sounds super nice,” Sandy said. *“Oh! Bummer! I totally forgot!”*

Jake knew what Sandy had forgotten as the many auras had been approaching for a while, and now one was close enough. In the distance, a large form rose, far larger than Sandy despite them both being C-grade worms. It was one of the massive C-grade Sand Worms, and it faced the flying worm for a while as they no doubt talked telepathically.

Now, it had to be noted that all Sand Worms were blind. Blind and deaf. But they had some magical sense that gave them a huge sensory range anyway. For the Sand Worms, it was through the sand, and Jake guessed that Sandy had retained that same sense... sand, having been replaced with this cosmic dust, which was essentially space? He wasn't sure.

Time passed as Jake just stood there waiting. Sandy sometimes made some slight movements but was otherwise completely frozen. He felt a bit out of place but didn't want to disturb their talk. Things seemed to get heated as both worms wriggled at each other before Sandy spoke to him:

“We're leaving!” the former Sand Worm said in a huffy tone.

“What happened?” Jake asked, confused.

“Get in my mouth!” the worm just angrily said, clearly more than a little upset.

Jake didn't want to argue. Sandy opened its mouth and breathed in as Jake felt himself be dragged. He could resist it but wanted to see what kind of new things the worm could now do. Yet, at the same time, Jake felt a faint telepathic connection be established with the massive C-grade in the distance. It was only one-way and just translated to a brief message: *“Thank you and take care of them. Show them the world.”*

Not sure what to make of it, Jake allowed himself to be dragged in, and he noticed that despite Sandy growing smaller, the inside hadn't. It looked like a massive dark cave as Jake stared down the worm's gullet, but the moment he fully entered the mouth, he felt himself shift and next-up found himself within an odd circular room that looked like it was made of stone.

A spatial pocket of some kind, Jake noted.

Inspecting his new surroundings, Jake quickly realized there was no way out. No doors or openings in the dark-purplish rock anywhere. Yet he also got a feeling that he could break these walls if he really wanted to by overloading the walls with destructive mana -

overloading the entire pocket with destructive mana. The rightful source is
novel ■ *fire* ■ *met*

After roughly a minute, he heard Sandy talk again.

"I would never! Jerks, the lot of them! Sand Worms suck!" Sandy said first-thing.

"Will you tell me what happened now?" Jake asked.

"Okay... I was so excited, right? Just evolved, everything seemed great, and then my old safe keeper appeared, and I am so excited to share my own awesome evolution, but do you know what the bastard said? That I am no longer a Sand Worm and have to leave! That the desert isn't a place for me anymore. I just got disowned by my own family because I am a better worm! Humph!" Sandy raged.

Jake frowned a bit but now understood the other C-grade worm. Sandy had grown beyond the desert. Rather than being confined to sand, their world was now everywhere in the cosmos.

"This is your fault? I could have become a Massive Veilsand Sand Worm, you know?" Sandy said, sounding sad. *"Now, where am I supposed to go? Can I even go anywhere? My quest says I am still not allowed in certain areas of the planet."*

"The world is far larger than you think," Jake said. *"You are a Cosmic Worm now, not a Sand Worm. The entire universe is your home, and while there are some areas you cannot go to right now, that is only temporary."*

"Still your fault," Sandy insisted. *"Guess it all works out for you... now I have nowhere else to go and no other plans. So, where are we going?"*

Jake couldn't help but smile at the speed Sandy just adapted. *"Before that, can you do it so I can see the outside world?"*

"See? Oh yeah, you got those eye things; I remember someone mentioning that some creatures have those. Here, let me try something."

The entire cavern-like dome he was in began shifting colors and expanded and retracted a bit. Then, finally, parts of it began to turn transparent. It then spread and encompassed the entire cave, walls, floor, and everything. From Jake's point of view, it was like he was floating in mid-air.

"That works?" Sandy asked.

"Yep. I do wonder, why do you have a skill to transport people like this?"

“Oh, it is not to transport people but to trap and super slowly eat them. Like, I can do this,” Sandy said as Jake began to feel something change. He noticed that his mana, stamina, and health were all being drained at an incredibly slow speed but drained nonetheless. It stopped just after as Sandy gave some more insight.

It was a bit like Villy’s Palate, where one could slowly absorb energy and even some remnant Records, except Sandy would drink the energies of living beings eaten and actually extract experience from that. From the sounds of it, Sandy still got little to no experience from killing things outright but was more about finding and eating natural treasures. And eating living creatures to slowly extract energy from them, it seemed.

“How many can you eat at once?” Jake asked.

“Depends on how many rooms I make... but probably around a hundred rooms right now? Not sure; I am going by my guts. Heh, guts when I am talking about my stomach skill. Anyway! Where are we going?” Sandy asked again after making a terrible pun.

“That way,” Jake said as he telepathically conveyed a direction. Sandy picked up on it and began worming through the air. It was like Sandy could swim through the air itself, though Jake to admit the speed was not that impressive right off the bat.

Jake decided to not rush Sandy as he could feel the worm was getting used to the new evolution. Instead, he wanted to test something else out as he took out his cauldron and began crafting a batch of mana potions. The process was simple as usual, but his goal wasn’t really to brew it but test the effect it had on Sandy.

“Hey, Sandy, can you absorb the extra mana from me doing alchemy?” Jake asked the worm as it wormed its way forward.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I do feel something in the stomach. I have to absorb it manually as I don’t have that effect active right now,” Sandy said. Jake once more felt the suction effect from the walls, and the mana that had spread in the room from Jake’s crafting was absorbed.

“Okay, now let’s try something else. Do be on alert and tell me if anything bad happens,” Jake then said as he tried to craft something a bit different.

Whenever Jake made poison, it had the effect of leaving the surrounding area a bit... contaminated. Back in his valley, he had his circle of death where he killed all grass in a large area, and in the Order and even his lab back in Haven, the entire place was designed to resist and contain his poison. This entire effect only got worse as time passed, and Jake knew that if an S-grade crafted poisons without bothering to try and contain the environmental effects, entire planets could find themselves contaminated.

He began his crafting as usual and felt that Sandy was keeping an eye on it. The toxic vapors soon entered the air without the worm saying anything about it. As he kept

going, he felt a bit of it be absorbed into the transparent walls and disappear. Still nothing. Jake finished his crafting and finally asked:

“So?”

“*All fine? The energy took a bit to filter, but otherwise, it was all good,*” Sandy answered. Jake felt relieved and nodded.

“*How far are we going anyway?*” Sandy asked.

“*Hm... far,*” Jake answered. He had not actually truly reflected on how far there was... and damn, was there far.

Due to the size of the Earth having grown to ridiculous levels and him having been flung to the other side of the planet, Jake estimated he had a little less than two million kilometers back to Haven.

Now, this did seem extreme, but it wasn't actually *that* bad. Jake could easily travel faster than a thousand kilometers an hour using One Step Mile repeatedly, so without rest, he could pass around twenty-four thousand kilometers a day or just shy of one hundred and seventy thousand a week. Factoring in fights and some issues, along with a bit of rest here and there, passing just a hundred thousand kilometers a week was likely more realistic. This would mean it would take Jake around five months to return... which happened to be just shy of the World Congress that would happen in roughly four months. At least he remembered it being in around four months. He did not have a timer counting down or anything, and he had to admit that his time-keeping when highly engrossed in alchemy wasn't the best.

“*Damn far. I have around two million kilometers, and I am not sure how much of that you can come along for, being a C-grade and all,*” Jake answered.

“*Hm, okay,*” Sandy answered. “*Do we have to hurry?*”

“*A little? But I also think it would be a good idea to make some stops along the way to hunt some C-grades,*” Jake said. “*It all depends on how fast you can travel.*”

“*So I can go fast?*” Sandy asked.

“*Well, yeah. Is it fine if I just do alchemy and meditate meanwhile?*”

“*Is alchemy that the thing where you make the mana come out? Sure! It is tasty. I want to practice too,*” Sandy answered.

“*Alright,*” Jake said with a smile. Sandy was currently flying only about two hundred meters a second, which was slower than Jake using One Step by a lot. He hoped that Sandy would be fast-

Everything suddenly seemed to warp as Jake saw the terrain all around them move incredibly fast. Sandy shot forward as if digging through reality, carried by space itself. He had no way to estimate how fast they were going... but it was fast. Faster than Jake could travel even if he pushed himself fully with One Step and Arcane Awakening.

"Can you keep up this speed?" Jake asked, wondering if Sandy was pushing it.

"Yeah? This isn't that fast, is it? Definitely faster than before, but I am an awesome worm now, so it makes sense, right? I can go faster but not for as long, and I am still learning, okay? So no judging," Sandy explained very logically.

"Alright. Don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything," Jake said.

"I will tell you when I need someone to kill another C-grade so I can steal its stuff, and I can get some proper compensation for you getting me disowned," Sandy said with the usual joking sassiness

"You do you," Jake kept smirking as he watched them fly for a little longer. Even if their speed was a lot faster, it was still just desert with a few large red rocky mountains all around for as far as the eye could see. Even Jake's eyes.

Closing said eyes and entering meditation, Jake began once more working on upgrading Wings of the Malefic Viper. Over this period, he had gotten some good ideas, but the problem was he had no way to practice. In order to truly practice and figure out if his ideas would work, Jake would need some kind of isolated space which he could try and escape from, but where the hell would he find something like tha-

Wait a second...

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Chapter 529: Searching for a Path

At the higher grades and levels of power, the scaling of survivability and damage output was not balanced. Killing an F-grade human as another F-grade human was easy. Just stab them in the heart, and they die.

For an E-grade, you had to stab them a few times in the heart and maybe land a few more blows before they went down for good. D-grade it got even harder, and nothing short of blowing off the head of another man would work as an instant kill. And even then, many could survive losing their head dependent on their skills and stat distribution.

C-grades losing their head rarely meant death. The Soulshape became stronger and easier to regenerate, and each part of it was less vital than in prior grades. Even the functions of the brain were all gone by C-grade, allowing one who had lost their head to keep moving. Sensory organs still mattered, and regenerating the brain and head was a huge burden, but most humans could overcome it.

Now, this was humans. Beasts were even harder to kill, with elementals harder than beasts. Due to how survivability scaled, it meant that the other party escaping was the likely outcome unless one party was at least a good deal stronger. Assuming the losing side decided to flee, that is.

All of this ultimately resulted in that when two beings of similar or equal power met, there would be no true winner. This was doubly true when the two beings facing off were Unique Lifeforms at the peak of D-grade. Both of them could slaughter weaker C-grades easily, and even higher-tiered C-grades wanted to avoid them due to their uncertainty in killing a Unique Lifeform. For failure would mean a delayed death just a few years later when the Unique Lifeform caught up, and victory would mean nearly nothing as even if their strength was equal, then killing an opponent in a lower grade wouldn't be rewarded by the system.

What they would instead do was take a side and support the Unique Lifeform for future benefits. That is unless there was more than one. If the supremacy of the Unique Lifeform was challenged. There would be sown doubt if supporting the Unique Lifeform was worth it, and even more so, then this would be a good chance to break off and attempt to do your own thing. To pursue personal goals... to get revenge.

The Fallen King and the Ashen Phantom Devourer had battled for nearly four hours with neither getting any advantage during the first encounter. The mountains were torn asunder, and thousands of unlucky observing beasts died in the process. After the fourth hour, the Ashen Phantom Devourer chose to disengage. A day later, it attacked again, and their fight resumed.

It was like a neverending cycle. The Ashen Phantom Devourer was a being that was near-impossible to kill. Its body was more like a living domain rather than an actual physical entity, making dealing damage incredibly difficult. At the same time, the King of the Forest had a powerful, constantly active barrier, and even if one managed to break it, all one found was a bark-like armor that offered incredible resistance to all damage.

This made it all a battle of endurance, and with both of them able to escape easily, no true winner would be found unless one party made a breakthrough or found something to truly exploit. They both knew this, which is also why they wanted to keep fighting. It was rare that a Unique Lifeform could find a being able to stand up to them and even rarer to find another Unique Lifeform. Other Unique Lifeforms were the closest they could ever get to kin, and this sparked an intense innate desire to prove themselves. Prove their Paths and prove that they were superior Unique Lifeforms.

Neither cared that their fight left a power vacuum ripe for exploitation and that those who before found themselves held back now chose to act.

William stared at the ritual circle as he operated it, karmic magic revolving around him. The oversized squirrel sat in its middle for a moment before opening its eyes, anger burning within from what it had just experienced. Not directed at William, but someone it had forgotten and now remembered. It bowed towards him before leaving, going towards the teleportation chamber.

What am I even doing? William asked himself for what felt like the umpteenth time in the last... year? Years? A long time that is for sure.

Shaking his head, he decided not to think about it too much. Whenever he made his own decisions, things just turned to shit anyway, so it was better for him to just do as was told by someone wiser: his master.

The ritual circle he was operating on was one he had been working on for a good while. It had been the final requirement for his Profession Evolution Quest, and taken all of his skills to pull off. Of course, it wasn't the only thing he could have made; all it required was for him to make something related to his profession at a sufficiently high level.

His Class Evolution Quest had also been easy. But his Race Evolution Quest was just... he didn't get it.

Race Evolution Quest

As you reach the end of D-grade, you have walked a Path seeking perfection. A Path of discovery of yourself and what you want to be. Yet you have not found it. Without determination and vision, there is no Path. Without desire, there is no progress. Without willingness, there is no life.

Objective: Find your Path (0/1)

William had found his Path already, so he didn't get why the fuck he hadn't completed the quest already. If he had completed it, he would be C-grade and one step closer to being useful to his master. But no matter how much he tried to figure it out, the quest remained uncompleted. It made absolutely no sense to him, and he had asked his master, but his master just said that he had taught William enough to figure it out on his own. This only frustrated him more as he felt like he was disappointing his master.

Just focus on your work, and you can figure it out later, he told himself as he prepared for the next somewhat confused beasts to enter the ritual circle. William worked his magic as he pulled on the karmic strings and increased their strength. He gathered them almost into a ball which he used to weave a tapestry and allowed the beast to see. And see, it did.

Its eyes filled with animosity, and it even threw William an angry glance. Not that he could blame it. He had allowed it to experience something that most would perhaps want to live without, but these beasts had all requested it. Not knowing had simply been more painful than now finding out.

As for what he made them experience? Memories. Memories of their lives before the system arrived.

To say that humans had treated animals shitty before the system was an understatement. William knew that he was the furthest from a saint back then, but the crimes he had committed were nothing compared to some others. Individual researchers had killed thousands of mice, and just how many fish were caught every day? How many deer were shot and killed? How many animals hunted or farmed simply for their hides or horns?

The answer was a fucking lot. Humans had been fine treating animals like shit. What would happen if you decided to kill a mouse that snuck into your home? Nothing. What would happen if you decided to use your BB gun to shoot down two squirrels? Nothing. There were no laws against it, and if there were, the worst that happened was a fine.

At least there was no true punishment before.

Now you had a small baby squirrel that remembered seeing its parents killed by teenagers. A baby squirrel that had grown to late D-grade. William's job was only to make them remember their entire lives and then give them an outlet and a new goal. He would find anyone related to the beasts using the karmic connections. Anyone who had hurt them or those who injured them before the system. The C-grade jellyfish would then teleport them to the vicinity of this area for them to carry out their revenge on humanity.

But... there were still questions that haunted him. He knew what he was doing. He knew what the purpose of what he was doing was. He knew the goals of Ell'Hakan and his master's expectations. He knew what the beasts were planning and about so many things.

Yet he still didn't know...

Why am I even doing this? Why am I helping some alien? Why is all I am doing still not enough? Why am I still afraid and still have nightmares?

And was another thing that bothered him a lot. One that had annoyed him ever since the time he went to see the Augur of Hope. A man he had killed. The Augur had greeted him without a care for their history and had shown only pity. He had then helped William find some people, but the last words he spoke as they parted still rang in his mind.

“I hope you find your Path once more. You were climbing a mountain back then, but all I see before you now is a bridge with the ropes cut.”

William hated that the Augur had to speak without actually saying anything. The last time they met, he had said that William already had a Path and now he suddenly didn't, despite finally finding meaning with his master. Then again, the Augur was still some D-grade; what the hell did he know compared to a Primordial?

No, he just had to work on the tasks given by his master, and he was sure he would find his Path. He had wanted to visit this former girlfriend of the Malefic's Chosen but simply did not have time due to the many tasks he was given. Not that it was a high priority.

According to Ell'Hakan, their recent encounter should put the Malefic Viper's Chosen out of commission for at least three and a half months, with the expected time being over half a year. William did not fault the alien for not fighting the Malefic One's Chosen outright. He was a damn monster. But he did think it a bit stupid to just piss him off like that. In fact, he was pretty damn certain Ell'Hakan's plans would fail miserably as if there was one thing William was sure about, it was that when it came to that monster nothing ever went as expected.

Not that it was truly any of his concern. William just did as he was told.

Jake considered for a moment where he was.

He was trapped in a different space... one where One Step would not simply allow him to step out. One would have to do something special to get out – or just go crazy with destructive energies in Jake's case – but if not, he was trapped.

Jake grinned and summoned his wings. *Time to upgrade these bad boys and escape Sandy's stomach!*

He didn't know if it was just dumb luck, but this was a perfect opportunity for him to practice. He informed Sandy of what he wanted to do, and Sandy responded by playing along. Jake felt the walls harden and the space stabilize even more than before.

Jake instantly knew escape just got a lot harder. If it was just space magic, Jake could maybe find a way with One Step, but it wasn't just space magic. There were other concepts mixed in too. If there wasn't, Sandy would be a Genesis Space Worm and not a Genesis Cosmic Worm, after all.

He could still probably overload Sandy with destructive mana or go ham with poisons or something, but even then, he wasn't sure how much damage that would even do to the worm. Sandy had honestly become a bit of a monster. The sheer level of power this stomach skill required was immense, and he reckoned nearly no D-grade would be able to escape on their own.

All he could say was that he was glad Sandy was on his side. Because damn, would it be annoying to have a worm kidnap friends and family and fly away if you pissed it off. Which reminded him not to annoy Sandy too much.

Dispelling his wayward thoughts, Jake refocused his mind on the task at hand. Wings of the Malefic Viper upgrade. He knew that he had to take it in a quite different direction than it currently was. There was not a hint of space affinity or anything like that in the wings currently, and if he was being totally honest, he wasn't even sure the upgraded version was all about space magic either. Likely there was some space magic involved, but as with many things, it was just never that simple.

Jake once more tried to correctly remember how he felt during the vision where he experienced the skill. He had definitely felt the wings be filled with energy. Way more than usual. Back then, the Viper had summoned them as phantasmal wings just to use the skill too. The source of this content is `move!◇firt◇met`

As he remembered more and more, one detail stood out. The Viper had changed color to green during the process, and at first, Jake had just thought that an effect of the then-S-grade's immense mana. But the Viper was far too good at energy control for that. So why had his body turned green? Jake also vividly remembered the Viper shooting into the distance, meaning it was not teleportation but more just insanely fast movement - movement that made space part... not helped by space as one would expect from a skill using the space affinity. Perhaps it was more related to Shadow Vault? No, that didn't seem like it either, especially after sim-Jake said he was of no help.

He felt a bit stuck. It was clear he was missing something crucial, and he was a bit mad at himself for not focusing on the skill more during the vision back then. Okay, then again, Fang of Man and Fangs of the Malefic Viper upgrading from one vision was great, and he couldn't fault himself too much, but still.

Jake began trying many different things as time passed. About a day went by before Sandy found a big C-grade sand lizard guarding some kind of natural formation of crystals or something. Jake had no idea what it was, but Sandy got excited and practically spat him out like he was a damn pocket monster to fight for his worm master.

Anyway.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 179 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 181 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

A good bit of exercise later, and Jake was back in the stomach, where he began testing again. He tried to infuse different concepts and see if that felt right, but nothing did. The entire idea of infusing something entirely new into the wings also felt wrong. Every other

upgrade had built upon what was already there. Expanded it. If it added something new, Jake could at least see it be linked with everything else in the skill. None of his current ideas were linked to any of the core functions of Wings.

As time passed and he practiced, he kept coming back to the issue of nothing he tried building upon what was already there. He tried to see if there was some hidden feature he had not discovered, some mighty flapping technique he had missed, but there was nothing. All infusing mana did was create more poison. As Jake thought this, he had a eureka moment.

He considered if the Viper hadn't actually used any of what Jake expected... what if he had done the exact opposite? Used only what the wings already had, but in an entirely different way. In a far more extreme way.

What if he had simply pumped out a poison removing everything between him and his destination, corroding a hole through reality itself?

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Chapter 530: A Logical Conclusion

It was an absolutely crazy thought. Poisoning space itself... no, poisoning reality. To target every single facet of reality and effectively create a vacuum of concepts between you and your destination.

That is also why the mist was used. The mist was from Blood of the Malefic Viper and thus contained Records of all poisons Jake had ever interacted with. With the Trial of Myriad Poisons, Jake had interacted with countless, and it wasn't like he had slowed down much after that either, still eating everything slightly toxic in his path.

Jake began his science and tried to work on how one would supercharge the wings the way the Viper had done, but also found it a problem to control the mist and form a tunnel between himself and where he wanted to escape to. Did he need to make a cylinder of poison or something that isolated everything around it? No, that would take way too much power...

What about shooting a canon of poison in the direction and then diving after that? It could work, but space tended to reform too quickly, and if his opponent was actively trying to stop him, he would need an insane amount of poison mist to do that. The mist also kind of sucked, to begin with.

He then returned to the very important detail of the Viper turning green. *Why had he done that? Some shield to protect himself from the poison?*

A few theories popped up immediately, but none fit. Jake was deep in thought and tried a few things as his wings pulsed with power, sending mist out. Ultimately, he decided that he first needed to make some kind of poison able to corrode through reality. Saying it so casually was damn weird, but he was serious.

Passive mana tended to not be that strong as long as you targeted the right things. This was why Alchemical Flame was so damn good at breaking down objects, as it directly targeted the passive mana and the concepts keeping things whole.

So, Jake needed a poison that targeted passive mana that didn't fight back. Maybe he could apply concepts from Alchemical Flame directly there.... yeah, that actually seemed doable. There were many plants and poisons potent at naturally corroding things. Acids found that went through stone that a C-grade could not even scratch like it was nothing, poison mist that would turn a block of metal an S-grade would dream of crafting a weapon from into swiss cheese. These existed everywhere, and Jake had consumed plenty.

But even if he made this, what about non-passive mana? Like where he was trapped right now? That kind of mana would fight him actively. Could he even make something that eroded the wall of Sandy's stomach? He knew he probably could with Touch, but as mist?

Jake groaned in annoyance as he felt himself be mentally pinged by Sandy. He obliged and found himself outside once more, instantly noticing that the area had changed to rocky terrain and before him was a large C-grade bird of some kind.

"Go human! Use bow attack!" Sandy said with excitement as Jake pulled out his bow and added another C-grade to his list of slain foes before getting back in his pokeba-stomach.

He did have to admit that Sandy was damn good at analyzing his strength and picking opponents.

Back in the chamber, Jake felt more relaxed after a bit of killing, seeing the entire thing with new eyes. It was like having a good night's sleep and then waking up to look at your project again. Jake considered different poisons he would need in the mist, and it quickly became clear he would need damn many concepts at once. No, he could not have all be active at once; he needed to make an adaptable mist that targeted everything at once but only actively targeted what it encountered.

And then he came back to that damn green color. Why the hell was the Viper glowing? Was it because... no... it made sense?

Jake had been looking at it all wrong. The Malefic Viper had not made a path of escape using the mist. He had not made a poison mist that eroded everything - he became the poison mist. Rather than dripping acid on the evil to get through, the Viper became a semi-solid ball of acid that was dropped onto it. So even if the metal above reformed, he would still get through.

The Viper had wrapped himself in it. Like a cocoon, the poison mist wrapped around him in a supercharged state. That was why the Viper was glowing green; his entire body had turned into toxic mist, and he used his power to keep it strong.

As Jake realized this, he felt like something clicked in his mind. He instantly checked Path of the Heretic-Chosen and saw that his intuition had been correct.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 3

Did Jake think he could upgrade the skill without experiencing another vision? Sure. Probably. But Jake also kind of feared that he would lose the skill with his C-grade upgrade or maybe lose the uses. So he wanted to use all of them, even if it was a bit of a waste.

Ah, who was he kidding? He just wanted to see Villy get embarrassed, have his ass handed to him, and be forced to escape.

Even with everything happening on Earth, the inside of the workshop appeared entirely undisturbed. Arnold was still working on his latest creation as he got an expected visit from a recent arrival to their planet.

Eil'Hakan had to admit that he found the entire construction quite novel. A massive metal dome with impressive enchantments all over. The material itself also looked incredibly tough, and he doubted that anything mundane could break through. It was truly a defensive stronghold, and even he would have issues breaking into it within any reasonable timeframe.

Luckily, he did not have to break in.

As he approached, the dome simply opened up to him as he met the assistant to the machinist, as the human named Arnold had been dubbed.

"Welcome, sir; how may I assist you?" the assistant asked. She was obviously aware of what was going on and knew that trying to keep Eil'Hakan out would only delay the inevitable. Besides, it was simply smarter to allow him access.

"Impressive construction, and even more impressive techniques present on the inside. I thank you for allowing me in without any needless delays. Do tell, is the machinist available?" Eil'Hakan asked.

“I will inform him of your presence,” the assistant said with a bow and a smile as she briefly left the welcome room. Ell’Hakan felt the doubt and hesitation in her but also some relief. A good emotion to amplify as it could lead to other positive thoughts and feelings. Having the assistant possess a good view of him wasn’t necessary, but a nice to have. No, the one he truly cared about was Arnold.

Ell’Hakan had done his research and found this man far more outstanding than anyone seemed to give him credit for. He was blessed by Void God Oras, something that even his Patron found utterly baffling as no D-grade human should be able to handle that. The ones a Void God usually blessed were either incredibly powerful members of the enlightened races and at far higher grades, or they were creatures explicitly suited to them, such as rare elementals or other monsters.

The reason why he approached this machinist was obviously for his mind. Because one other thing he discovered was that the man had no true loyalty to the Malefic’s Chosen. He simply worked for him and did some commissions. There appeared to be no true relationship there; it was purely transactional. The fact that he had stayed even after the City Lord left was further proof that Arnold simply did not view himself as part of the Malefic Chosen’s faction. So if he was offered good enough terms and his emotions swayed properly, there was no reason for him not to switch.

“Sir, he is ready to receive you,” the assistant came in and said with another bow less than a minute after leaving.

Ell’Hakan thanked her as he entered the workshop. He had prepared for a trap just in case but found nothing even as he scanned his surroundings. The moment he was in the workshop, he found himself overwhelmed by the sheer number of projects going on. It was astonishing one man could do so much at once, and the complexity of every project was incredible.

The planet Ell’Hakan came from was not a very technologically advanced one. He had learned that quickly after the integration. So this all served to overwhelm him more but also strengthened his desire to recruit the man. The Celestial Kingdom lacked people like him as no natives were technologically minded, and Ell’Hakan had a feeling this man alone could lead to a technological revolution.

“It is truly my pleasure to finally meet you,” Ell’Hakan said as he saw the machinist. He did not look like much, but as mentioned, then it was not his body but his mind that was worthy of respect.

“What do you want?” the man asked curtly. If not for his Bloodline, he would have thought the man was hostile, but no. There were no such emotions. In fact, the emotional spectrum he felt from the man was incredibly narrow and muted.

But it was there. Ell’Hakan had a faint fear that the man somehow didn’t possess emotions at all, as that would partly explain his ability to have a Void God as his Patron.

It turned out that even if he was peculiar, then he was still a human with emotions to bite onto and manipulate. To Ell'Hakan, the slightest thing was enough.

"I am incredibly impressed by your work, and I come with an offer," Ell'Hakan said, knowing not to mince words with the man to avoid testing his patience. "I am aware your ties to Haven are shallow at best, and you are primarily here due to the resources offered, yes?"

He did not even need the machinist to answer to know it was true. His emotions gave it away.

"If that is the case, I can offer you something better. The backing of not just a single city but an entire world. A planet full of natural resources for you to explore and exploit to your liking, with near-endless funds. And all I ask in return is a bit of conditional loyalty," he offered with a smile.

That is when he felt just the emotion he wanted. Desire. Greed. This man was stoic, but alas, still human and would fall to human desires like any other. But there was also a lot of distrust. Arnold seemed to be in thought as Ell'Hakan tried to soothe his worries.

"To show my sincerity, we can start with a temporary working contract. Simply let me hire you for a while. Come and see my planet once I return, and if you refuse to work for me anymore, I swear I will help you gain passage to anywhere else," Ell'Hakan said convincingly. He also took out a small star-shaped token and handed it to the machinist.

"At the very least consider the offer."

Arnold looked at the token and took it. A faint sliver of trust had wormed in. It was weak and only trusted that Ell'Hakan would give him time to think and was not there to cause him harm, but that alone was a springboard. He amplified Arnold's emotions and used his Bloodline liberally to the level of getting a slight headache. The machinist was a tough one compared to the Malefic's Chosen. If Arnold was a faint candle of emotions, then the Malefic's Chosen was a roaring inferno.

"I will," Arnold finally answered with a genuine nod.

"To further show my sincerity," Ell'Hakan said as he summoned a number of metals from his planet that none of his current crafters could work with. Instantly he felt the man's interest, and Ell'Hakan could not help himself but smile as he subtly left. This chapter is updated by **novel•fire●net**

He had a good feeling Arnold would make the right choice.

Arnold sat alone after the alien left. He felt a strong sense of trust in the man but paid it little attention. Checking the recording of the conversation, he did not necessarily find anything amiss either. Arnold considered the offer and checked some provided

information in the token. It even included a potential draft of an offer as well as a method to contact Ell'Hakan.

The offer was good. Brilliant, even. Far more than Lord Thayne and Haven had or likely would ever offer him. Their resources were limited, and it had primarily been the merchant Sultan helping him out by selling Arnold's products and buying raw materials. To say he was supported by Haven and Lord Thayne would be simply incorrect. At least not in an institutional capacity. Lord Thayne had personally helped him, but that had been transactional in nature.

If Arnold went by his guts, the answer was a no-brainer. He had far more trust in Ell'Hakan supporting him than Lord Thayne losing interest and just leaving for good. Arnold would definitely accept the offer if he had to choose.

But he didn't choose. Because truly, what he felt didn't matter and should never be a factor in his decision-making. Arnold started out with the most obvious and made a detailed analysis of his own thought patterns, identifying that his emotional responses had been adversely affected, further cementing that he should not use his flawed mind to decide.

Additionally, he analyzed the offer, truly finding it worth it even from a far more objective standpoint. The benefits would be more than Haven would offer, but that was only in the short term. Using his current working model for predicting behavior and going by all the information he had, there were few positive outcomes.

Ell'Hakan had made the Malefic's Chosen an enemy, and it did not take an Eye of Oras to see all the potential risks involved in that. Lord Thayne was simply too unpredictable in every aspect for Arnold to make any conclusions or properly assess him. He did not make the decisions Arnold would expect in nearly any situation. He was an utterly illogical human. And if there was one thing Arnold wanted to avoid in his calculations, it was high-variable outliers ruining the entire model.

Looking over the data one final time, Arnold simply nodded and returned to his work. The decision he came to was simple.

Just don't choose a side.

Lord Thayne would not ask for him to choose one, and Ell'Hakan had a standing offer, so why decide now? The only reason he would be forced to make a decision was if either party lost. In which case, he would choose the person not losing.

With Lord Thayne, however, the only valid parameter to rule him the loser would be his death, while for Ell'Hakan, it would also include him fleeing the planet. The reason for this difference?

All data indicated he could survive an angry Ell'Hakan coming after him.

All data indicated he couldn't survive an angry Jake Thayne hunting him to the ends of eternity.

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Chapter 531: Just Winging It

Jake was rubbing his hands as he looked forward to seeing Villy in a perilous situation that forced him to escape. Entering the vision, he was not sure what to expect. Maybe Villy getting beaten up? Him waltzing into the territory of some far more powerful monster, making him tug his tail between his legs?

As the vision appeared, it was neither of that. He saw Villy flying through an odd area with purple-ish mist everywhere. Comet-like balls of ice flew all around him, some of them several kilometers across while others were far smaller. Jake also saw that sometimes space itself seemed to crack, and small vacuums opened up, sucking in mist and some of the smaller comets.

He had a hard time figuring out what was going on. Villy was in his C-grade Wyvern form and looked incredibly distressed as he dodged comet after comet. It was like he flew aimlessly. A few minutes passed before a giant comet suddenly exploded, only to reassemble again but into a vaguely humanoid form. Villy did not hesitate and released a breath on the newly born... comet elemental? Ice elemental? Either or, he quickly dealt with it, but that didn't at all give him a reprieve.

Finally, Villy seemed to spot something. With high speed, he flew to the side and, to Jake's surprise, encountered a massive wall of purple ice. Flying alongside the wall, Villy soon found a small cave and stopped before it.

His body began morphing and shrinking, and within five seconds, the familiar humanoid form of Villy appeared. Familiar, yet foreign. He looked young in the vision, and Jake had a strong feeling this was the earliest vision of the would-be Primordial he had ever experienced.

Villy collapsed and leaned against the inside wall of the small ice cavern and breathed heavily. He closed his eyes for a moment before summoning a large metal plate of sorts to block off the hole, sealing himself within the cavern.

Sitting back down, the Viper surprisingly fell asleep as time accelerated. Once the Viper woke up again, he quickly took out some kind of magical device. It looked like a

compass of sorts, and Villy frowned as he looked at it. After a bit, he took out another few weird devices as his frown only grew.

“Fuck,” he just said as he groaned and brought both his hands to his head. “The exits should have remained for at least another week... did that bastard lie to me? I swear...”

Just those few words made Jake put two and two together and realize what was happening. The Viper was in some kind of minor world or dimension, a bit like Yalsten but probably far smaller. Also, clearly far more unstable compared to Yalsten in its heyday.

Jake knew about these kinds of places. They were often small dimensions that resided in the infinite layers of space. One could not break into them, with the only way in certain natural entrances that sometimes opened, and one could also only exit through these small holes. These dimensions tended to be of incredible value exactly because of this. Any small world that had been isolated for a long time was bound to have given birth to several potent natural treasures, especially as many of these small worlds rarely tended to have beasts or monsters and had singular dominating affinities. There would still be enemies, but it was often only very specialized creatures like the elementals or creatures born to guard the treasures.

It appeared that Villy had entered one such place with bad information and found himself screwed over and trapped. Which maybe didn't sound that bad if the world would open up again, but there were a few minor issues. First of all, how long would it take? It could take longer than Villy's natural lifespan. One had to remember that Aeon Clok had killed people far more powerful than himself by sealing them in a world a bit like this and just having the passing of time kill them all.

Then there was also the issue that these places could get far more dangerous during their lockdown period, and based on the comets going wild and Villy seeming panicked, Jake assumed this was the case.

“I need to get out of here,” Villy talked to himself as he stood up and took out some more magical devices, including the compass.

“It hasn't been that long... or is the layer meant to be this weak?” he muttered as he considered his options. Jake saw the Viper deep in thoughts before steeling himself. “It could work.”

Wings appeared on his back, making him look a bit like Jake with his wings out.

“Those fuckers... they somehow accelerated and sealed the entrances,” Villy said as he double-checked some weird magical circle on a map. “At least halfway sealed them.”

Jake was beginning to question if a C-grade Villy could truly escape a naturally sealed-off world like this. One had to remember that after Yalsten was sealed off, no one could

escape, not even the A-grades. But if this was not a natural sealing but one simply accelerated by mortal hands, then it should still be possible.

Villy sat down in meditation with his wings summoned as Jake felt the energy and toxic blood move within them. Time seemed to move in odd ways as days passed with the Viper focusing on his wings. Jake got the feeling this was not some sudden burst of inspiration but him picking up the work on an ongoing project. The Viper had either worked on an escape skill like this before or had already completed several elements of the skill.

However, what was important was that it was not done, allowing Jake to feel part of the process. The first thing he picked up on was that each wing was different. It was like the Viper poured different energies and manipulated the blood with variance, with each wing having different mixes of concepts as a result. Jake felt them both and noticed what differed.

One wing held blood that would be able to corrode passive energy, and the other wing held blood that would corrode mana with intent. Jake was momentarily confused but instantly realized why this was actually brilliant. Poisons of similar natures tended to amplify one another, while those of opposite natures would attack each other. This did not fully apply due to the sheer variety of concepts in each wing, but it eliminated most of the potential conflicts that could arise. Also, the Viper's infused intent in each wing was now physically removed from one another, and focusing his intent to accomplish the two tasks in separate wings was far more efficient and easier.

Next up was the process of creating the cocoon. On this note, then Jake had thought that the fast movement Villy had displayed in the first vision was part of the skill's effect, but that was quickly proven wrong. Nothing done would actually make him faster, but due to the nature of the magic, it would rapidly increase speed momentarily. The mist would erode everything in his path, making it like he was effectively flying in a vacuum of concepts. Considering the limited time the cocoon would last, fast movement right off the bat was also a necessity, and then one just had to let the momentum carry forward. This text is hosted at noel**fire**.net

The vision progressed more or less as expected as Jake saw the Viper adapt and make the Wing's skill effect on the fly – pun intended. Feeling it like this, Jake had to admit that the Viper had truly been a monster. The toxic concepts that had taken Jake days to identify were found within hours by the Viper, and his level of energy control when it came to the toxic energy was utterly insane. He was at least slower than Jake in some places, but they were few and far between.

After what Jake estimated to be roughly five total days in the cave, the Viper opened his eyes and got ready. Scales covered his body as he flew out of the cave and into the storm of comets. He dodged them more easily now due to his smaller humanoid form, but it was clear he was not as fast in this form.

He flew for a quarter of an hour, periodically checking the compass he had brought until he was at the right spot. It was a weird fractured point in space that looked almost like a broken phone screen with microcracks everywhere.

The Viper took a deep breath as he got close and slowed down. That is when time slowed down, and Jake felt the skill be used for the first time. Both wings were infused with a lot of energy as Jake's eyes opened wide at discovering how he infused so much energy... he summoned several wings pretty much on top of each other at the same time.

An explosion sounded as both wings blew up from energy overload, Jake feeling the pain as he experienced Villy's body like it was his own. The Viper rapidly gathered the energy and wrapped it around him like a barrier. When he did so, Jake saw his body turn green and knew it was not due to his body changing... it was simply Jake seeing the effect of everything being corroded all around him.

A second explosion sounded out as the Viper shot forward towards the broken space. A faint trace was left in his wake as he went into the fractured exit point. The poison around him revolved at nearly impossible speeds, each particle of mist able to break down the fundamental laws of reality itself.

Once the Viper entered the fractured point, he simply phased into it. Even if the Viper was strong, he was not strong enough to break a space tunnel like this... but he could burn a small hole into it and pass through. Space reformed behind him like he had never been there, and Jake only saw a faint glimpse of darkness before Villy appeared in the outside world, surrounded by large snowy mountains. Behind him, a crack in reality had been formed, but it healed within a fraction of a second, so fast a simple blink would miss it.

The cocoon of mist dispersed nearly instantly, and the Viper began to fall to the ground, clearly exhausted. Jake felt a profound sense of weakness all over, and moreover, like a part of his Soulshape had been sacrificed to make the escape possible... which is when Jake found the final piece of the puzzle.

What he had been stuck on was how to control the poison. He now realized he didn't control it at all; it would control itself. What the Viper had done was sacrifice the wings themselves to infuse parts of himself into it. His own will and desire.

The last thing Jake saw was Villy turn in a certain direction, murder in his eyes. Clearly out for revenge against those who had dared to try and trap and kill him.

Everything then rewound, and Jake saw the vision again. Even if it appeared long, the entire vision had only been about fifteen minutes total, considering all the fast-forwarding.

Jake slowly hammered out the errors. He was confident and smiled as the vision ended, and Jake returned to the real world.

He appeared sitting inside Sandy's stomach, and instantly the worm was on him.

"Wow, what did you do? I felt something super weird just now, like, you were gone and then back or something? That was sooo weird... you were still kind of there, but not really, you know?" Sandy launched into a tirade.

"I did special magic," Jake just answered jokingly.

"Boo, you should share," Sandy answered.

"How about I share with you the results? Can you stop for a moment, so I can test this out? Just be warned, I will try to get out of here, and I can't promise this won't be a little painful. I may just make a hole or something on my way out," Jake answered.

"Oh, go ahead; I will try and stop you, right?"

"Go ahead," Jake answered confidently.

Jake focused as his wings appeared. The skill had already upgraded the moment he returned, and the learned knowledge turned instinctual. Everything happened instantly with the system's assistance, as dozens of wings superimposed upon each other and exploded, forming a cloud of mist around him. He then sent himself flying forward towards the wall of the stomach chamber.

He observed everything carefully. He felt and saw himself impact the stomach wall, and the moment he did, it seemed to simply disintegrate. Everything turned black for a moment as no concept reached Jake, not even light. He felt entirely isolated from everything, and even his Sphere went haywire for a second. He felt the mist fight against everything and slowly consume itself to burn him a path, and then...

And then he was in the outside world.

Jake stopped and saw he was still in rocky mountainous terrain as the mist had already dispersed upon escaping. He took a moment to collect himself and saw the giant worm flying just above, and as he looked up, he also felt Sandy's attention on him.

"You escape- I mean, got out!" Sandy said with surprise.

"That I did," Jake answered. He had to admit that he had expected the fatigue to be more prominent. Then again, he had a monstrous mana pool.

There were no marks anywhere on Sandy either, and Jake wondered why that was.

"That was so weird!" Sandy said, explaining to him what had happened. "I was just waiting and wondering what you were doing until you disappeared again and then just popped right out of my skin! Like, it makes no sense; it was like you weren't really inside me at all..."

Jake considered it for a moment before he understood the explanation. He had not even interacted with the physical body of Sandy, only the Soulshape, and one couldn't even say he had done that... it was more like he had been spat out of the Soulshape. He had to admit, even now, he still didn't entirely understand how the skill worked, and he had a feeling the Viper hadn't one hundred percent either when he made it.

Not that Jake would complain. He finally opened his messages and saw the upgraded skill.

[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – Refusing to remain earthbound, the Malefic Viper sprung wings to devour the skies. You, too, refuse to be earthbound. Allows the Alchemist to summon two phantasmal wings and take flight. While active, you can burn the blood within the wings and release potent toxic fumes. The toxicity and effects of the poison are based on Blood of the Malefic Viper. Toughness and maneuverability of the wings and speed are based primarily on Agility but receive a bonus from all physical stats. The wings count as part of your body for all relevant skills. Passively provides 1 Agility per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May the sight of your wings be the harbinger of death.

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[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – Refusing to remain earthbound, the Malefic Viper sprung wings to devour the skies. Refusing to be bound or trapped anywhere, the wings of the Malefic One shall always leave a path of escape. Allows the Alchemist to summon two phantasmal wings and take flight. While active, you can burn the blood within the wings and release potent toxic fumes. The toxicity and effects of the poison are based on Blood of the Malefic Viper. Toughness and maneuverability of the wings and speed are based primarily on Agility but receive a bonus from all physical stats. The wings count as part of your body for all relevant skills. Allows the Alchemist to further infuse and sacrifice both wings to create an opportunity to escape if in a perilous situation. Doing this makes resummoning the wings impossible for a variable duration, dependent on Agility and the amount of energy infused into the wings upon the sacrifice. Passively provides 3 Agility per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May the sight of your wings be the harbinger of death and instruments of escape to feed another day.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 184 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 185 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 182 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

Wings was a contender, if not a winner, for longest skill description by now. The added description did not say much he didn't already know but did explain one thing he was unaware of... he couldn't summon his wings again. It was like the Soulshape framework itself had taken damage from using the skill. The more Jake looked at it, the more insane it seemed. The Viper had found a way to summon a new appendage to the soul and then used that added appendage as a way to sacrifice a part of the soul. Jake knew it was possible before as a concept but had never seen it used like this. The most common variant was severe boosting skills that could leave long-lasting damage to the soul.

The problem with the soul was that one really had to just give it time to heal. While there were treasures to hasten it or very special things like the Soul Renewal he had used on the King, the best medicine was truly just time.

Oh, and then there was the added Agility which Jake would definitely not complain about. Two levels in his profession were also a welcome addition if a rather expected one.

"So..." Sandy said after a while.

"Sure, sure, go ahead and gobble me up again," Jake sighed as the worm happily ate him like a tasty snack. Once he was inside, Sandy began moving again, continuing their adventure across the world.

"Hey, human Jake, can you tell me more about that weird magic before?" Sandy asked.

Jake wanted a break anyway and obliged. "You see, my good friend Villy, the Malefic Viper we talked about before, has given me a Legacy that has a lot of skills and..."

They talked and relaxed as Jake only had one thing he felt a bit sad about. The vision of Villy had not really been the embarrassing moment Jake had hoped for, but more just the snake god showing off how skilled he was.

Oh well, better luck next time. There had to be a vision where Villy was caught in a *really* embarrassing moment, right?

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

Chapter 532: Godly Interference & Advice

"This is complete bullshit," Carmen said as she stared at the golden projection.

"It wasn't my call, but it comes all the way from the top," the projection of Sven said, shaking his head. "This may sound curt, but it is partly because of you. Your personal relationship with the Malefic's Chosen is both a merit and a demerit. On the one side, it ensures us a spot in this world, but on the other hand, then if someone else gets in charge, we may be ostracized."

"Still complete fucking bullshit," Carmen now raged. "Do you really think Jake will just be all fine with us supporting this orange Cheeto fuck? Do you think he will just go: "oh well, what can you do?" and let us go about our day like nothing? Fuck no, there will be hell to pay."

"You are talking as if his victory is a given," Sven answered. "Even if he is stronger than this Ell'Hakan, it does not mean he will beat him in the political arena. Besides, it is not even Ell'hakan we are supporting, but Arthur, another human. We are not betraying anyone, for we were never on the side of Lord Thayne, to begin with. He will get even better terms than Arthur if he comes out on top, and with Miranda likely around, she will be a voice of reason."

"Funny," Carmen scoffed. "You think he gives a shit about some terms or benefits? Jake is an impulsive kind of guy, and if he thinks you slighted him, that is the only thing that matters."

"Carmen, we are not getting anywhere if we talk in circles," Sven sighed. "The decision has already been made, and none of us can do anything about it. All we can do is make the best out of the situation. The top brass thinks this will have the highest overall chance of success, so that is why we are going with it. You can agree or disagree, and it changes nothing. If you want to do anything, it should be to make sure Jake stays positive towards us if he wins."

Carmen just kept frowning as she abruptly turned off the projector with a huff, still thinking it was fucking bullshit.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, still sitting beside her, not entirely getting everything that was going on.

Sylphie had chosen to stay with Carmen during the time since Jake left, and the two of them had used Paradise as a home base while exploring. Renato was the kind of two-faced asshole Carmen expected and did not choose any side at all, only fortifying the city itself in case anyone chose to target them. Not that she cared, he let her and Sylphie do as they wanted, and Carmen's mother was doing way better. She had

settled down and now just worked as a tailor. The original plan of bringing her to an area Valhal controlled had been delayed due to the Salvento family having a lot of assets to claim and Renato being very good at convincing them to stay "just a little longer" all the time.

"I don't know, Sylphie," Carmen sighed. "This entire situation is fucked up, and they just expect me to sit tight and do nothing? You know what, how about we go fuck up some of their cities? Go punch some City Lords to give them a bit of their own medicine."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched excited, probably just wanting to get in a few good fights.

"Let's do i-"

Carmen's eyes opened wide as she felt a headache come on. She knew what it was and gritted her teeth as she heard the voice of Gudrun.

"Carmen, I understand your feelings," she heard the voice of Gudrun say as the god launched into a lengthy explanation. "You remind me much of my husband, you know? Like Valdemar, you never see the bigger picture because you personally don't have to. But this entire scenario is quite delicate. Earth is a melting pot right now and in an untenable situation if one has even the slightest foresight. The Holy Church and Risen would never get along, and not even the Viper's Chosen could create peace among two factions that have warred for trillions of years. In the same way, then some humans will never come to accept the Order of the Malefic Viper either. They will never be able to disconnect the Chosen from the Order, for historically, there has never been any such separation. You know him as a person; they know him as a symbol. Conflict is inevitable and healthy, and this entire conflict will only lead to Earth entering a more stable state. No matter who wins. All we want to make sure of is that no matter who wins, we keep an opening. If the Chosen chooses to close this opening, then so be it. Removing ourselves as an organizational presence from Earth is truly not that big of a loss, and as per the doctrine of Valhal, you would be able to stay if you wanted. Anyone would. And remember, we have not actually chosen a side; we have, in fact, done the opposite and said that we will support either side that wins. If the Malefic's Chosen is the kind of individual that will make a "me or them" ultimatum, then I will only feel strengthened in this decision. For that is not the kind of man we would want to work with in the long term. So, Carmen, all I am asking of you is to do nothing. For remember, what you do will be the actions of Valhal. I cannot tell you what you can or can't do, but I can implore you to think about it. If you are truly confident the Malefic's Chosen will win, then just sit tight and keep trusting in him to handle it."

It was a damn long message that came like a huge package. Carmen took a while to process it all and wasn't sure what to think... Gudrun had been incredibly hands-off for Carmen, and she was surprised any god from Valhal would suddenly contact her, much less the wife and de-facto leader of the day-to-day operations of Valhal.

This is why Carmen found it suspicious, and even if she had a damn headache from receiving a divine message, she still responded.

"You do care about Earth... if not, you wouldn't go this far as to contact me and try to explain things," Carmen answered.

Carmen got an amused chuckle in return as Gudrun answered. *"No, we care about the people on it... which is also why I mentioned that you could stay on Earth even if Valhal was made to leave. People like Jake Thayne care about the people they choose to care about. He has chosen you as someone he cares about. So even if Valhal leaves Earth and you stay, we won't have lost anything worth mentioning. And if the Malefic's Chosen loses, I think it wise for you to bring your loved ones and leave Earth altogether, even if we do enter a partnership. For the safety of both you and the potential new leader of your planet."*

"The way you talk makes it sound like there is even a chance Jake loses," Carmen still argued.

"There is. Maybe not this time, but the Chosen of Yip of Yore is not one to be taken lightly. Yip of Yore isn't either. He is a very unknown character to many, and what many do not know is that he showed up to Valhal and challenged Valdemar to a duel not that long ago. The mere fact that he still lives today should be proof that he is not the jester many believe him to be but can represent a genuine problem even to gods who stand at the pinnacle," Gudrun explained.

Carmen wanted to argue more, but her head was pounding. Gudrun also knew this and retracted her presence, leaving Carmen alone. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists as she turned to a worried Sylphie.

"Change of plans. Fuck those cities and let's just go slaughter something else," Carmen said with much annoyance. She was pissed off and *really* felt like getting her frustrations out on some unsuspecting beasts. Besides, she and Sylphie should be able to handle a few weaker C-grades by now.

Someone else was also finally contacting his Patron after quite a while of no talking. After having a lot of long conversations, Jake finally initiated contact with a certain god.

"So, got another vision," Jake said as he reached out to Villy.

"Related to Wings, I see," Villy just answered.

"Yep."

"Are you busy or something?" Jake asked, feeling like Villy was far less talkative than usual. He had not reached out, even after Jake got his Wings upgrade, which he usually did. Nor when Jake had helped "make" Sandy.

"I am just waiting for you to address... you know," Villy said.

"Oh. That. Yeah, alright. So, it is quite clear to me that this Ell'Hakan guy had prepared for a long-ass time and clearly did not hold back when it came to divine guidance. I am going to guess that this Yip of Yore had blessed people on Earth that helped to act as mouthpieces and relay messages for a while," Jake said, sharing his thoughts.

"That is precisely what they did," Villy answered with relief. "I will admit, I had expected you to be a bit angrier. You were taken by surprise, and someone died, with Earth being thrown into quite a situation. All something we both know I was aware of and could have warned you about." New NOVEL chapters are published on www.fire.net

"Well, yeah," Jake said with a shrug. "And you kind of did by telling me to stop slacking off, didn't you? Also, we had this talk before that this falls into mortal affairs. The one thing I am wondering is, why does this Yip not care and help his Chosen so much?"

"His goals for his Chosen are different from mine, and his Path is also very different. I cannot give you the exact reason as I don't know it, but he is up to something," Villy shared.

"I see," Jake answered.

"There is also the fact that you two are not equal. You are the Chosen of a Primordial. My Chosen. This was never a fair fight, to begin with, and he was just trying to even the playing field, expecting me not to do the same out of pride. I also trusted you to handle it yourself. Even if you suffer temporary setbacks, you should be able to overcome them. People may die, but as harsh as it may sound, that is something I am fully willing to see happen as long as you keep moving forward," Villy explained. "And about Yip himself, I will have him handled. I can feel he is cooking up something, but he is not the only one skilled in the kitchen."

Jake considered the Viper's words for a moment. *"Is that also why no one else was warned? Aeon should have seen it coming. Or Stormild, if that damn elemental was paying attention. Shit, didn't you say Oras is the master of seeing stuff? Did none of those really warn their own people on Earth?"*

"Nope, not a single warning was given to anyone. Mind you, the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon also noticed it would happen but said nothing. And I hadn't told them not to either. You just must understand that giving warnings like that isn't really a thing and is even frowned upon by the system. Not even for the Holy Church. It goes against convention, and if a settlement falls and a few billion members of a faction die, so what? It is a minor loss of no consequence, and in the eyes of many, just a healthy culling of the masses," Villy further added on.

"I get it, jeez," Jake said with a sigh. "Let's move on to a happier topic. Thoughts on my new ride?"

"I will admit, it is not actually a race I am familiar with," Villy confessed. "Mind you, Cosmic Worms are nothing new and only semi-rare across the multiverse, but a Cosmic Genesis Worm is a first for me."

"Any idea how I made it happen?" Jake asked.

"A few, but nothing concrete. Ultimately, we both know it is related to that monstrous Bloodline of yours as well as your arcane affinity. Rather than me trying to come up with theories, I find it better you just figure out the truth and then tell me," Villy answered.

"That I can do. Oh well, back to killing stuff and flying with my wormy friend until it is time to kick Ell'Hakan's ass and boot him off the planet," Jake said with a smile.

"Sounds like a plan. But I will give you one warning, as Yip clearly doesn't care about conventions. People like Yip and Ell'Hakan are annoying fucks. They are planners, through and through, and a head-on approach tends to never work out well. Their victory conditions also tend to vary widely. If his goal is just to institute a World Leader, then why would he ever fight you? There is no need to. So think about why he does what he does far more. Think about what his plan may be. I am not telling you to try and be a planner yourself, as quite frankly, you would suck at it, but I am telling you to broaden your field of view. You killing Ell'Hakan would be your best victory condition, and he knows that. Thus he will act and plan according to that. Additionally, then this kind of planner tends to have strategies with multiple win conditions, some better than others, but all acceptable, with more fail-safes than you can imagine. Chances are the final confrontation with him will not happen on your terms, and I am not sure you can do much to change that besides making sure that even if it is on his terms, it is also on yours and you are not taken by surprise. Anyway, that is all I am gonna say, and good luck," Villy said, sharing his final nugget of wisdom.

"Thanks, and good luck to you too," Jake said in return, having a feeling Villy was also up to something behind the scenes. He did say he would handle Yip of Yore, after all.

Their connection faded, and Jake reflected on how Villy had actually been relieved at Jake not blaming him. Jake did not see why he would. Villy had not been the one who told Ell'Hakan to come to Earth; he had not been the one who made the United Cities Alliance morons, and he had not sent Jake to the other side of the planet. True, Jake was targeted because he was the Viper's Chosen, but that too was something Jake had picked to be. He could have renounced the Blessing at any time before reaching D-grade, and now as a Heretic-Chosen, he had already embraced the Path and whatever issues it could bring to be a Chosen. Sure, he still wanted to avoid the responsibilities, but that was only to be expected, as who likes responsibilities?

No, the only ones Jake blamed were the United Cities Alliance and Ell'Hakan. They were the ones who had started shit, and Jake would gladly throw that shit right back in their faces. He just had a bit of a distance to go, and some progress to make.

"Hey, Sandy, be a bit less picky for hunting spots," Jake said.

"Hm? Why?" Sandy asked curiously.

"I need one level for something good," Jake said with a smile. He had killed one weak C-grade without getting a level and knew the next one would give him that level-up. Which would mean it was finally time to get his last class skill from Avaricious Arcane Hunter.

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

Chapter 533: Hunter Level 180 Skill Selection & Being Hunted

It had only taken Sandy about a day to find good prey for Jake, and it wasn't even guarding that good of a natural treasure according to the worm, heavily insinuating he should feel thankful.

His opponent had been this weird wooly thing that Jake had no idea what was about, but it bled and suffered from necrosis the same as everything else, and with it only being level 201, Jake quickly took it down. Quickly being a relative term as the damn ball of wool had still been damn tanky. Anyway, with it finally dead, the last level came.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 180 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

And it was skill-selection time.

****Avaricious Arcane Hunter class skills available****

Jake was naturally excited. These last skill selections always felt special, and this profession skill had not disappointed with his freak soul mutation skill. Jake did not necessarily want a similar skill for his class but something more directly related to combat. Maybe an upgrade to Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter? Oh, how about a skill, *any* skill, that scaled with Perception? He would very much like that. He had some Free Points saved up, and if he happened to get a skill that scaled with Perception... well, he had an excuse.

So, without further ado, he dove in and saw five options. It was as expected, and true to tradition, he went through them.

[Minor Arcane Seal (Rare)] – Through the concept of stability, none shall find a path of escape. Allows the Hunter to create a seal by infusing stable arcane mana into a chosen target or area around the Hunter. Consumption of mana is dependent on the object or area the Hunter tries to seal. The durability of the seal is dependent on Wisdom and mana expenditure. Adds a minor bonus to the effects of Minor Arcane Seal based on Wisdom and Willpower.

And the first one was a solid dud that Jake quickly skipped over. He knew how to infuse stable mana into stuff already.

[Hunter's Blade-Fang Style (Epic)] – To you, your weapons are your fangs, and your fangs are your ultimate shield. A defensive combat skill that revolves around countering and dodging your foe to keep distance and minimize damage taken. Unlocks intermediate proficiency in the Hunter's Blade-Fang Style and adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, and Perception when using a bladed weapon.

The first interesting option. It was an actual melee fighting technique skill. It had a slight overlap with Fang of Man, with the stat effect increasing while wearing a weapon. In cases like that, the strongest skill would take priority, and while you would gain a small bonus from the other one, it was minor. As for if he wanted to pick the skill? No. There was a chance Jake could upgrade it to the style he had made with sim-Jake, but there was also a risk the innate knowledge from this skill could lead him astray. One had to remember that Jake's fighting style was dependent on his Bloodline, so no normal skill would ever be offered that truly fit him. Unless it actually referred to Jake directly in the description, he wouldn't even consider it. Hence he moved on.

[Grand Arcane Explosion (Epic)] – Through sheer power and an abundance of resources, you can overwhelm your foes. Overload your surroundings with unstable arcane mana and detonate it all to create a massive explosion. This attack is especially effective against the environment but also causes significant damage to anything else caught in the blast. Adds a bonus to the effects of Intelligence and Wisdom when using Arcane Explosion.

Skill makes Jake go big boom; Jake no need; Jake already knows how to go big boom.

[Arcane-Shadow Vault of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] – Your prey believes it can escape your avarice, foolish in its assumptions as your pursuit is endless. Through practice and sheer power, the Avaricious Arcane Hunter can turn into an Arcane-Shadow to either attack or defend. Allows you to vault forward a short distance between you and your destination. Phasing through physical or magical obstacles will result in either destroying the obstacle or impeding you entirely. Your methods are crude and destructive, allowing you to create an arcane explosion at your target destination based on the distance traveled. Adds a bonus to the effects of Agility, Endurance, and Intelligence when using Arcane-Shadow Vault of the Avaricious Hunter.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your existing Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra, resulting in the loss of the skill

And there it was. Jake had expected to see this kind of skill offered, and it came as expected. This was the reward for sim-Jake's work so far, but it was clearly not good enough. He knew that sim-Jake would not accept his Legacy merely being some ancient rarity skill. In fact, he was pretty sure his simulacrum would want to beat him senseless if he picked it. Hence he moved on just as everyone would expect. Because, as always, the best was saved for last.

[Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)] – The Avaricious Arcane Hunter is relentless in his pursuit of a stronger foe, and it only ends when he so desires. Once a target is found, the hunt shall only end in death. When hunting prey, you only grow in deadliness. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to accumulate momentum during a hunt by slowly finding an opportunity to strike. This momentum can then be turned into a tangible weapon. Successfully landing blows while not taking damage yourself hastens the accumulation of hunting momentum. Can consume all hunting momentum to significantly empower a single attack to deal devastating damage. Momentum can carry over if a new hunt begins shortly after another one ends. All skill effects have an increased effect the higher the level your foe is. The base speed at which hunting momentum is accumulated as well as the maximum amount of momentum possible is determined by Perception.

Jake read the skill over carefully.

If one asked Jake what his biggest problem was, it would be huge finisher attacks. Arcane Powershot was damn strong, but not some massive finisher, and while Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had filled that role for a good while, it wasn't at the level of what some other attacks he had seen. Carmen had her Fist of Ragnarok, his brother had that huge lighting attack, and many beasts also had supremely powerful attacks they could only release as a final gamble. Shit, that weird space-tunnel attack by the Panther had been insane, even for its level. Jake had kind of wanted something like that, and while he realized this skill would not give him some massively powerful blow, then it was good too. Dependent on how effective it actually was, of course.

There was only one huge plus. It was a skill that scaled purely with Perception and was a skill that allowed Jake to translate his Perception into actual damage. Some of his class skills and his archery skill already did this, but this added another layer. Moreover, nothing said it required one to use a ranged weapon, so Jake could also land a far more powerful melee blow using this Hunting Momentum. Yes, that was now the official name of the momentum Jake accumulated during the fight.

Needless to say, Jake picked the skill because why the hell wouldn't he? It was a no-brainer and clearly the best. The moment he did so, he felt the instinctual knowledge enter his head. Honestly, there wasn't much to it, and he knew that to truly get a feel for

the skill and how good it was, he would need some actual combat. What he was sure of was that his overall damage output had just increased a lot.

After his talk with Villy, Jake had also changed his mind about just charging back. It seemed like Ell'Hakan and Arthur did have lines they refused to cross, and he had to trust other people in his life to be able to fend for themselves. Caleb should protect Jake's family, and Miranda could handle herself, especially if she managed to get to the Grand Mangrove River. In there, she should be absolutely safe. He also wondered why, even now, no one had tried to take the Pylon in Haven yet. As long as he wasn't put on that thirty-day timer, he truly wasn't in that much of a rush. And if it was taken, he could just get it right back.

Speaking of Miranda. Jake had already reached out for her to contact him once available. If Ell'Hakan was making some plans, so would Jake. Ell'Hakan had clearly done a lot of research into Jake and even had his Patron help, but his research was limited. There were things not even the gods knew or could find out.

So why not make use of that? Of course, for him to truly figure out a method of approach, he would need to speak and strategize with Miranda. He just hoped she had gotten to the Grand Mangrove River safely. The link to the origin of this information rests in *novel✕fire✕net*

Miranda regretted not forcing Sultan along. Not to have his companionship or fighting power, but solely due to that flying ship of his. Neil had managed to teleport them far, and they were making good distance with him teleporting them a few more times, but outside of these teleports, they were slow.

The problem was with Mark and Louise, Hank's son and daughter. Neither of them had reached D-grade, making them far slower than everyone else and forcing Hank to carry one and Christen, one of Neil's party members, the other. Miranda was not at all a physically proficient fighter, but even she outclassed the two of them several times over.

Now, being slow would be fine if not for the fact they were being chased. It was clear that the United Cities Alliance wanted her dead, just as Ell'Hakan had warned, and a group was in hot pursuit. Clearly, then the United Cities Alliance had some teleporters still around somewhere, or at least some way to teleport around, as they quickly chased after, despite teleporting so far from Haven.

This meant that despite their headstart, they were slowly getting caught up with. It was unsure if they could fight this group, but Miranda doubted it. Neil and his party were good fighters, but not at all at the level of true elites, and information on them was also abundant, making her sure Arthur had factored them in. Miranda herself also wasn't a good fighter in a straight-on battle like this.

Luckily for them, they reached the Grand Mangrove River before they were fully reached by the other group.

“Shit,” Neil cursed the moment they entered the mangrove. “I felt a teleport about... more than a kilometer, less than ten, right behind us.”

“Can you teleport us further in?” Miranda asked with concern, looking at Hank and the others.

“No, this place is messing with my space magic quite badly, I can use it locally, but it is like the entire area is warped slightly,” Neil shook his head.

During this time, they never stopped running as they dove further and further in. In far enough for monsters to appear and hassle them, but fortunately, Neil and his party were there to handle with. Eleanor, Levi, Silas, and Neil handled most everything, with Lillian also offering some support, but it was limited what she could do.

The water below them stirred as Miranda felt movement behind them through it. It was lucky the area was swamp-like, giving her some benefits as a Verdant Witch but far from enough to fight without proper preparation. Thinking quickly, Miranda took out some bottles she had gotten some Jake a long time ago for experiments. They all contained his blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper, and she had nearly forgotten she even had them after she discovered how useless they were if anyone else than Jake used the blood.

Crushing all the bottles, she spilled the liquid all over the water. She knew it could attract something they didn't want to attract, but it could also do just the opposite. Just after she did this, a large crocodile emerged from below, one nearly at the peak of D-grade.

“Hank! Take Mark and Louise and keep running!” Miranda yelled to the builder as Christen tossed Louise to him. Hank complied and started running further away. Not only because of the croc, but due to what came from behind.

Sadly, he did not get far. The water rose in front of him like a barrier as it crackled with lightning. Hank turned back in a panic, and so did everyone else who was not too busy with the crocodile.

A group of five appeared, all of them giving off strong auras.

Miranda recognized them as the group with Arthur during the Auction, and all of them had powerful equipment, and there was even a caster with the Fulgarian Deepcaller class Jake had sold the Akashic Tome to. He was also the one who had made the barrier of water. She identified a few of them and knew they were in trouble.

[Human – lvl 174]

[Human – lvl 178]

But she still believed they could at least put up a fight until more presences appeared behind the wall, having circled around with incredible speed. Miranda saw them as she squinted and gritted her teeth.

[Infernomaw Hound – lvl 199]

[Frostmaw Hound – lvl 199]

[Thundermaw Hound – lvl 199]

Three large dog-like creatures, each of them more than five meters tall, guarded their path of escape. Miranda prepared her magic to hold them off as she released a pulse of Verdant energy. It entered the water below, but the Fulgarian Deepcaller slammed his staff into it, sending a pulse of lightning through, nullifying her mana.

He smiled confidently as Miranda frowned.

“A pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Wells. I am Mahowny, leader of the first advance party of the United Cities Alliance. Took us quite a while to finally catch up, but here we are,” the man spoke with confidence. Not that Miranda could fault him. He turned to the others in the group and smiled.

“We are not merciless. It is only the City Lord of Haven and her assistant we are after, and the rest of you are free to leave. But should you choose to stand in our way, we will show no mercy,” Mahowny said, almost tauntingly. He was full of himself, and Miranda wanted to do something.

Just then, he opened the barrier a bit, and all three Hounds jumped in and killed the crocodile. It was an obvious show of strength, and they all knew one side was superior.

“I still don’t understand why you find this all necessary. You are choosing to work with an unknown Chosen from another planet, and for what? Do you truly think this will end well, even if all your plans work out? He is using you, not the other way around,” Miranda said.

Mahowny just smirked. “One of the good things about being a soldier is that my job is not to think about those things. I just follow orders and get the job done, and in this instance, my job is to kill you. Truly, it is nothing personal. Now, you can either decide to give yourself up and have your followers here leave or fight. I am fine with either option.”

Miranda tried to look like she was deep in thought. She felt herself being closely monitored by the party in front of her. All five of them were above 170, but the biggest problem was the three hounds. If she tried to use any magic, she did not doubt they would react and pounce. The other side clearly knew that they risked taking a loss or two if Miranda or the others had any trump cards, making them prefer if she just surrendered.

All Miranda could do was to make use of this and drag out the time. All she remembered about the Grand Mangrove River was that Jake had made a friend there, and she had hoped to draw them closer using the blood.

“Time is up,” Mahowny said after Miranda did her darndest to look conflicted for around a minute. Miranda prepared herself along with the rest of her group as the other side was about to engage. “You have made your choice, and now it is time to-“

He didn't get further as he clamped up. Everyone stopped in their tracks, with the three hounds suddenly lying down on their respective branches, whimpering. An aura had swept into the area, making Miranda's eyes open wide. It was stronger than anything she had ever felt on Earth, and she had no doubt the source was well in the C-grade.

She slowly turned her head and saw the figure that was the source of the aura through the thick roots of the mangrove. Miranda did not know what to expect, but it was not that. A young woman with snow-white skin and scattered scales across her body walked on water like it was solid ground. Her hair was long and white like the rest of her body, and her eyes were red with reptilian pupils. She wore a dress that looked like it was made of snakeskin, swaying behind her as if weightless. She looked like something out of a fairytale.

[Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake – lvl ???]

The young woman - no, C-grade monster turned humanoid - watched them all as she seemed to be looking for something. Or someone. Finally, her eyes landed on Miranda.

“Who are you?”

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Chapter 534: Snake Girl = Danger Noodle

Miranda's mind was a bit jumbled from the powerful aura, and it took her a moment to formulate a response. This resulted in her not being the first one to answer.

“I sincerely apologize for disturbing your area,” Mahowny said as he bowed. His party members followed suit, their nervousness palpable. Sweat was pouring down their brows as they also realized that the monster that had appeared was more than any of them could handle.

It had to be mid-tier C-grade... which meant it was above level 250. The group from the United Cities Alliance could probably handle a weak C-grade using their hounds, but the snake was an entirely different issue. It was leagues above anything they could even touch.

"We are only here for this woman and will leave once done," Mahowny further said. "And we are more than willing to compensate you for allowing us this."

The snake did not even turn to him but kept staring at Miranda. Miranda felt the pressure and finally came up with an answer. "Miranda Wells... I work for the Malefic's Chosen."

As if a switch had been flipped, the humanoid snake's eyes opened wide. "Really? Is he here?"

"No, sadly not," Miranda said, the pressure on her instantly alleviated.

"Oh..." the snake deflated.

Miranda saw the Mahowny and the others had turned white as sheets, now matching the complexion of the snake girl. They looked like they were about to plan their escape already, having realized they were in a very perilous situation.

"I was being chased here by enemies of the Chosen," Miranda quickly pounced on the opportunity to remove the elites from the United Cities Alliance. "They aim to kill me and hurt the Chosen through that."

This got a response out of the snake as she turned her head to the party of five. Follow current novels on novel.fire.net

Mahowny instantly raised his hands in defense. "This is all a misunderstanding, I-"

He didn't get further. Miranda wasn't sure what happened, but one moment he was talking, and the next, there was no head on his shoulders. The movement had been too fast for her to see. It wasn't even certain if it was teleportation or just incredibly fast movement.

"Did you know that humans have these unwanted movements in their aura when they lie? I learned that from the ones I acquired to perfect this human form," the snake said in an insidious voice. It looked like she hadn't even moved as she now stood there with a severed head, parts of the spine hanging out.

Her rhetorical question did not have a chance to be answered as movements came from below. The aura of the Alabaster Snake had completely masked them as three C-grade snakes shot up from the water, and within less than five seconds, the hounds and human party were all dead.

Miranda could only stand there and stare as it happened. She had hoped for assistance, but the response had been prompt and unexpectedly harsh. There was no questioning or doubt in the snake; she had simply acted and wiped them out unceremoniously.

She saw that Hank looked incredibly worried, and Neil's party still had defensive positions. It was a sloppy one, as they all knew that if any of the snakes that had just appeared chose to attack, none of them would survive.

Are these the "friends" Jake talked about? Miranda asked herself, already knowing the answer. He had mentioned it so casually like it was no big deal... but the snake in front of them was far more powerful than anything she could have imagined.

The three C-grade snakes that had appeared were all far larger than the small and delicate-looking Alabaster Snake, but they all showed respect to her and bowed before ducking their heads underwater once more, dragging the corpses along with them.

"Humans are really questionable," the snake said with scorn before looking at Miranda. "Ah, but not you. Just the normal humans, if you know what I mean. Anyway! You said you are here because of the Forefather's Chosen? Why are you here if he is not?"

Miranda was not sure what to answer but quickly read the mood and emotional state of the powerful C-grade. "There is a conflict going on right now, and the Chosen is preoccupied with handling other matters, including an enemy Chosen that serves a god who is antagonistic towards your Forefather. Due to this, the city I managed for him could no longer properly protect itself, and he asked us to go here."

The snake listened attentively before tilting her head. "But why here?"

Smiling, Miranda was happy the C-grade asked. "Because he trusts that you can keep us safe while he is gone."

The snake reacted a bit more strongly than Miranda had expected. With starry eyes, the snake clenched her fists and put on a massive smile that looked more than a little odd. "Re... really? He trusts me?"

"If not, he would not send us here," Miranda promptly answered. "It is truly my pleasure to meet a confidant of the Chosen. As I said before, then my name is Miranda Wells. May I ask what your name is?"

Miranda had to admit that a cold shiver ran down her spine as she asked the question. If Jake had met this snake, there was a chance he had also given her a name, and no matter how dumb it was, she didn't doubt the female snake with her personality would be all giddy and proud of it. She swore that if he had named the snake Snakie or Scaley or anything like that, she would be unable to hold her poker face and would smack him over the head the moment they met again, Chosen or not.

“A name?” the snake asked, still all happy about what Miranda had said. “I sadly do not have one of those. Most simply call me by my race as I am the only one in these parts. You can refer to me as it too if you so desire.”

It was almost funny to see how the female snake now tried to act all professional and like she was welcoming guests into her humble abode. Which was exactly what she did in her mind, Miranda reckoned.

“Please follow me back to the center of the mangrove. Ah, we even have a few humans there and lodging for your kind,” the Alabaster Snake said.

“Really?” Miranda asked with genuine surprise. Humans living in a C-grade infested danger zone? She had a hard time seeing that.

“Yep, you will see when we get there,” the snake girl smiled. She looked towards the water for a moment before the three large snakes emerged again. Alongside them, a wooden barge had also appeared, seemingly out of nothing. “Get on for a quicker trip. Ah, did you know the Chosen rode it too? We helped him the last time he was here, and he was so nice.”

“I can imagine,” Miranda said, having to fake her smile a little. How in the hell did Jake end up making friends with nearly every monster he didn’t just kill? Heck, even the ones he killed, he somehow ended up making friends with posthumously in the case of the Fallen King.

She and the others got on the barge and got through the Grand Mangrove River far faster than expected. The snake girl ended up joining them on the barge and was incredibly talkative once she learned everyone there had met Jake before. Neil was the first to truly reciprocate and asked curiously about the area and the odd spatial fluctuations he felt.

It turned out that the mangrove truly was a mysterious place. The water was far, far deeper than it should have any right to be. It was likely spatially expanded somehow, and so were some areas of the Grand Mangrove River in general. Small clearings from a distance could turn into large open areas once one entered them and vice-versa.

The place they were being taken was one such clearing. It was close to the center of the Grand Mangrove River and the lair of the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake. Miranda also learned along the way that the snakes had pretty much fully taken over the entire Grand Mangrove River and had hunted down all powerful C-grades that could prove threats. The rest they had left alive, effectively to fatten them up for future slaughter.

It didn’t take them long before they reached their destination, and Miranda was astonished when she saw it. After entering a clearing, the area opened up and revealed what looked like a massive clear lake with sunlight coming down from above. Floating

barges and platforms with buildings filled the clearing, making it look like a small city had been constructed.

Miranda saw well over a hundred people walking on the barges, and there was clearly too much space for the number of people. She also noticed something else... the moment they appeared, all the humans rushed out of their homes and sat down on their knees at the edge of the barges, many of them shivering.

“How come these people are here?” Miranda couldn’t help but ask.

“Oh, I had them brought here. It is humans who tried to pass the river but were captured. After the Chosen was here, I realized that I didn’t truly understand the world or the humans, so I decided to get some. While humans are dumb, they can also know a lot. Oh, I even got this form after studying humans a whole bunch!” the snake shared with a big smile.

“So they are staying here against their wills?” Hank asked curtly. Miranda threw him a glance to shut up, but the snake had already heard him.

“Well, I brought them here against their wills, but I guess they can try and leave? Not that I see them make it out without getting eaten or recaptured,” the Alabaster Snake laughed, clearly finding it funny.

“I see,” Miranda said before anyone else could speak. “Could you please bring us to a place where we can relax? We have been on the move for a long time.”

“Of course!” the snake girl said enthusiastically. “I prepared a special place in case the Chosen returned! Humans are really good at making things, I will admit that.”

Miranda nodded along, glad to have everyone else stashed away. She had a feeling that the snake girl wasn’t going to leave them alone, though, so she would bite the bullet and handle the C-grade. She feared what any of the others could say, and if the snake got mad for just a single second, it could tear any of them apart.

“If you are interested in learning more about the Chosen, I am more than willing to share. In fact, I will have to contact him soon using one of my skills, and you are more than free to come along. I can even relay a message,” Miranda offered.

“Really?” the snake asked with glee. “I would love to!”

She was almost swaying as she sat there happy, and it bought Miranda enough time to get the others off the barge and into a mansion-like building that did not look like it should be able to float. Once they were all gone, Miranda and the Alabaster Snake headed towards another large unoccupied building for Miranda to finally get back to Jake.

And probably have an incredibly long conversation with an overly enthusiastic, highly erratic, and incredibly dangerous C-grade snake.

While waiting for Miranda to get back to him and hopefully having reached the mangrove safely and met up with the albino snake, Jake decided to have some fun.

One of the things Jake liked the most about new skills was the honeymoon period. He remembered when he had just gotten One Step Mile or when he had gotten Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, and the fun time he had experimenting and using the skills for the first time, truly pushing them to their limits.

Relentless Hunt, as Jake had chosen to shorten yet another overly long skill name to, was a skill he naturally also looked forward to having fun with. There was much to figure out, and Jake went in with glee as he stood before a large bear. A large bear breathing fire. Oh, and there was lava coming out of its mouth at all times, and even some running down its hide.

Finally, it was about the size of a warehouse.

[Emberdust Magmabear – lvl ???]

Jake estimated it to be around level 210 and was probably the strongest C-grade he would face so far in pure power – though he had a feeling he was facing a good matchup. Observing it from afar, he saw it bathe in a volcano and then soak in the sunlight for a few minutes before eating some metal out of a mountain. Not a single creature dared get near. Sandy had told him that something good was hidden within the lava of the volcano, and the worm acted all coy like it was doing him a favor, while Jake knew Sandy just wanted whatever was in that damn lava.

Now, while this was undoubtedly a fight, it was also a journey of exploration. A chance for Jake to see what he was truly capable of. An opportunity to fully explore his new skill and learn its limitations and when it was best used.

The massive beast looked like it could give him just that opportunity.

Jake engaged it from afar with a fully charged Arcane Powershot, blasting a hole in its body right off the bat. The blood that came out was thick and burned like lava, but the hemotoxin Jake had poisoned the arrow with infected it nevertheless. His Sense of the Malefic Viper also made him aware the poison worked as intended, proving it was truly a being of flesh and blood despite its appearance.

As his strike hit and the bear roared, Jake also felt it right away. Odd energy welled up inside of him, and it even seemed to now exist in the atmospheric mana - always being there, he was just unable to see it before. He knew right away it was this Hunting Momentum.

He did not hesitate to pour just a little bit of it into his second attack. The bear tanked the hit just like the first, and Jake did notice the effect. The Hunting Momentum was not a concept or an idea like Stealth Attack or even the Mark of the Avaricious Hunter that just added extra damage. It made all aspects of the attack stronger. The arrow flew faster, it penetrated deeper, dealt more damage, and even the poison on it appeared to have a slightly heightened potency. The momentum's effect on the poison was slight, and Jake noticed it was also brief.

Several more attacks were released as the bear charged, leaving a path of lava behind it. The ground itself erupted as the lava shot up towards Jake and forced him to retreat. The bear was incredibly durable, and even as he inflicted injury after injury, it was still barely affected. It also quickly became clear Jake was not the only one "building momentum," so to say.

The bear was heating up. Its very skin began to glow red as its lava-like blood boiled, and it soon began to give off an orange mist that burned the very air. This mist spread quickly and was carried by the wind. The bear roared as the mist was sent out like a shockwave, combusting any time it encountered a physical object, setting that unlucky object on fire.

Jake retreated further and further as he kept attacking from range. His arrows flew through the mist, and he did notice to his annoyance that it burned off the poison, but the arrows themselves – the stable versions at least – managed to survive.

His opponent was far larger than him but also far slower. As long as Jake kept his distance and bombarded it with ranged destruction, his Hunting Momentum would build, his Arcane Charge from the Mark would build, and the poison he did manage to land would accumulate. He had a feeling this kind of beast was one that excelled in battles of attrition by simply outlasting and slowly burning down its foe. Too bad that it had met Jake.

No, too bad Sandy had decided the worm really wanted to eat its treasure.

Looks like we are in for a long one, Jake thought as he smirked to himself. He was definitely not complaining.

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Chapter 535: Taking Status & Making Plans

Jake breathed heavily as he stared out at the vast landscape before him. An area the size of a semi-large city was scorched and burned as the remnants of the battle remained. In the middle of it all lay a giant beast, its very blood only adding to this environmental destruction. Even in death, its blood retained the same destructive properties as it burned the ground.

The final attack of the bear had been quite something. It exploded and released an attack reminding him a bit of the Scorched Plains attack from the bow he lost when the Sword Saint cut it in two at the finale of their duel.

Seeing this destruction made him reflect a bit. During the vision with Palate Jake had seen, Villy and the C-grade fighter had ended up destroying a massive city and the surrounding environment, and Jake did have to confess he had wondered why he felt so far from being able to do that despite approaching C-grade himself.

This fight gave a bit of insight into how close he was actually getting. If he truly wanted, he could cause absolutely massive destruction with his arcane energies. The thing is, he didn't, as that was a waste of energy.

Villy had mentioned this before and said that massive, flashy attacks that caused widespread destructions were not proofs of strength but proof of horrible control. Now, some attacks did get big due to their naturally chaotic nature, and a part of the attack's power lay in pushing yourself beyond your limits of control, but this was only the case for rare attacks that often couldn't be used more than once a fight.

No, rather than make a large explosion that covers a large area, make a far more intense explosion in a small area. That way, as long as you hit, the attack would deal way more damage. Someone should really have taught the bear that, as it was certainly a victim of making huge flashy attacks... then again, what if it was used to only fighting massive foes like itself? In that case, large attacks were probably more effective.

Anyway. The fight had taken nearly an entire hour, and Jake was all the happier for it. Because, oh boy, did he have some data on Relentless Hunt.

Firstly, on the accumulation of Hunting Momentum. While Jake was fighting or just even observing his enemy preparing to fight it, the momentum would build. While in the tracking and observation phase, it was incredibly slow, dozens of times slower than when he was actually fighting. During the fight itself, the Hunting Momentum would accumulate passively, but the speed at which this happened varied.

If Jake landed blows and did the damage, it would speed up, while it would slow down or even halt entirely if Jake was hit, with the slow-down based on the severity of his injuries. If it halted or slowed down, it would slowly pick itself up again as time passed, and he kept avoiding blows, while it would speed up very quickly if he began to land attacks.

That was how the accumulation worked. Now for the actual effects of the Hunting Momentum.

The first thing here was the maximum amount he could have at any time. It was natural there was a cap because if not, couldn't Jake just silently observe a peak C-grade for a year or two, build up an utterly insane amount of Hunting Momentum, and then proceed to launch an arrow that could break the moon in half.

Yeah, so it made sense there was one. However, this is not to say the cap was low because one had to remember one detail: the maximum was determined by his Perception. All parts of the skill were determined by his Perception. And if there was one thing Jake had a lot of, it was Perception.

Now, Jake did not know what the expected cap of Hunting Momentum was, but he felt like his was quite a bit higher than that. A lot higher. He had managed to cap it out during the fight because he tried to not use it and had released one single attack expending all of it. This brings us to the actual effects of the skill.

The effect was varied based on the attack it was applied to. It wasn't just a percentage amplifier, but in some ways, it still kind of was. Jake could not turn a normal stable arrow into an arrow of certain doom, but the benefits of Hunting Momentum it received percentage-wise were more than Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Overall, though, Jake would say Hunting Momentum was best used with his already powerful attacks because, holy hell, had that Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter been powerful.

When Jake had used the Hunting Momentum, he had felt the oversized wood-like arrow almost thrum with the concept. Like an invisible wind embracing it, he had felt the power within. Further using Arcane Powershot had only made it stronger, and when he let go of the string, it flew forward faster than anything Jake had ever shot before. It seemed unimpeded by anything, and even the remnant destructive arcane energy left by Arcane Powershot was empowered, allowing it to pass unbothered through the combusting mist.

It had hit the bear before it could even react, and the giant beast had been blasted back, lifting it off its feet and launching it several hundred meters backward. It had survived, but it was heavily injured, and Jake had finished it off shortly after that. As for how much it made the attack stronger percentage-wise, Jake couldn't tell for sure... but it was significant. It wasn't just the increased damage that mattered but the increased speed, the increased energy around the attack, and the momentum making it more penetrative and more resilient to getting whittled down by barriers or domains.

He had also discovered one other major thing. The momentum worked on an "attack," which came with both some good and some bad traits. Good traits? A melee strike counted as an attack. This did not just mean the attack did more damage but once more also that it was faster. His punching motion simply sped up, allowing him to truly take his opponent by surprise. It meshed *very* well with his counter-style.

Bad traits from it working only with attacks? Touch of the Malefic Viper did not work with it at all as it was not classified as an attack. Activating his Arcane Charge from Mark did not count because, again, not an attack. Activating or amplifying a poison using Touch also didn't work. Moving to block, even if it is with the intent to counter, did not work, even if the counterattack follow-up was affected.

Anyway, there were more things to the skill, but Jake believed he would have ample time to use it moving forward. He and Sandy had made plans, and those plans included a lot of killing during their travel. But to fully carry out their plan, Jake would need to talk to Miranda first.

Speaking of Sandy, the worm had decided that eating all the lava in the volcano was also a necessity, so he was stuck waiting even more for the hungry worm to get done. Waiting anyway, Jake chose to take a look at his full status for the first time in a while.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 183]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 181]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 185]

Health Points (HP): 30251/55140

Mana Points (MP): 30279/104437

Stamina: 10938/50240

Stats

Strength: 4689

Agility: 7656

Endurance: 5024

Vitality: 5514

Toughness: 4129

Wisdom: 6684

Intelligence: 5814

Perception: 11867

Willpower: 5709

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VIII], [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], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths]

Class Skills: [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Moment of (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Focus of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Legendary)], [Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (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 (Rare)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (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)]

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Looking through it, Jake mostly took notice of the ever-expanding length, but another thing was that many rarities stood out, especially in his class. While for many, an epic skill would be considered excellent, to Jake, it felt lackluster by now. The rare and below skills were even worse. Enhanced Splitting Arrow was one he often used yet had not upgraded since shortly after reaching D-grade, and despite it being a common attack in his arsenal, it was still only rare. Arcane Powershot was his go-to archery skill, and that was also only epic rarity. He could excuse himself for not upgrading Shadow Vault as he had sim-Jake on that, and his tracking skill was also one he felt like he would upgrade when the time was right, but many of the others he felt like he really needed to work on before evolving. At least his core skills needed to be refined and upgraded.

All more tasks he would take this coming hunting period to address. He had a feeling that many of the skills wouldn't even necessarily be that difficult to upgrade as long as he consciously tried to do so. He had already refined many of the skills significantly just by how much he used them, so a bit more effort and some experimentation and it should be possible to at least get a few good upgrades in.

As Jake was considering all these things, he suddenly felt a small nudge. He instantly smiled and responded.

"Miranda? Good to finally hear from you. Did you arrive at the Grand Mangrove River safely?" Jake asked first thing. This content belongs to *novel fire net*

"Don't worry, we got here safely," Miranda answered promptly. *"We were saved by a certain snake that you seem to know. One with a humanoid form resembling a young girl or woman. Is that something you might know about?"*

Jake thought for a moment before frowning. *"Does not ring a bell... wait, is the race of the snake Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake?"*

"Yes."

"Oh damn, and she already got a human form? That is actually impressive," Jake said in admiration. *"I knew she was talented just due to her high level, but it seems like I underestimated her. Maybe the Blessing also helped, but I reckon it is mostly her effort."*

It was the truth too. One thing Jake had learned about monsters while he researched the Pollendust Bee Queen was that their abilities to make use of natural treasures varied widely and were highly dependent on the talent and ability of the monster to actually refine and make use of these treasures. A bit like how one craftsman could turn a pile of ingots into a legendary sword, while a far less skilled smith would only be able to make it epic.

Other factors like compatibility with the treasure also factored in, but talent and skill were also considerable elements. The most important skill was naturally energy control to properly absorb a treasure, and as with many things, good energy control carried

over and also mattered when it came to using the universal Polymorph skill all monsters got at C-grade. Villy had told him that it often took years for a beast to properly design and refine its humanoid forms to be useable. So for the Crimstone Snake to do it in only a few months? Very impressive.

Oh, on a side note, Jake had no idea how good Sandy was at energy control or absorbing treasures. Not that it seemed to matter as the glutton would just make up for it with quantity.

“I should mention the snake is currently listening in and very pleased by your assessment,” Miranda answered. *“I was told to relay that she very much appreciates your praise and would gladly welcome you to visit if you ever get the time. Not those exact words, but that is the sentiment, at least. She very much wants you to visit.”*

“Alright. Keep up the good work, both of you. I will definitely visit when I come to get you and the others after all this is over. Now, can you tell me a bit of what happened after I was thrown away? Give me the down-low.”

Miranda proceeded to give Jake a description of all that had happened recently. How the snake had killed the pursuers from the United Cities Alliance, how Ell'Hakan had not wanted to kill her but even warned her, and he even learned that Arnold had contacted Miranda using one of his communication devices to say that Ell'Hakan was still staking it out near Haven, likely waiting for Jake to return.

Jake considered all this and began asking some things of his own. He knew Miranda had ways to contact the Sword Saint and many others around the world. She had said that the old man was missing in action after presumably getting ambushed in his residence, but Jake didn't put much stock in it. There was no scenario where he saw that old monster die to a bunch of goons, even if they were the top elites of Ell'Hakan.

Which begged the question, why attack him without using their full force? The answer was simple: they didn't know how strong he actually was. One has to remember that the only time the Sword Saint had revealed his full power was during the duel at the end of the Treasure Hunt, and only a handful of people had been present then, none of which would share it publicly.

Miranda agreed with Jake's assessment and even added to it. People did know a duel had taken place, but only the “result.”

The result being that the Sword Saint was apparently crippled for a long time afterward. In reality, he had simply been recovering from using his Transcendence, but in the eyes of the world, he had lost and taken grievous injuries. That is at least what Miranda believed the public interpretation was, and Ell'Hakan was right about one thing. If enough people believed something, it became accepted as the truth.

Jake knew that he himself was not some grand strategist, and neither was Miranda, but they didn't need some perfect plan either. They just needed a plan that was good enough and relied on things they knew Ell'Hakan could not predict. Relied on gaps in his knowledge.

"Say, the Fallen King and that other Unique Lifeform are still engaged in some kind of battle, right?" Jake asked Miranda.

"Yes, according to what I was able to gather, they were still locked in a standstill," Miranda answered.

Jake nodded and considered for a bit. *"I have an idea."*

If there was one thing Jake was certain of, it was that Ell'Hakan expected a rematch with Jake. The man likely believed Jake was the only human on Earth that stood a chance against him, with all C-grades locked away. The only other entity who could threaten him would then be the Fallen King or maybe Sylphie, but Sylphie was far removed from Haven.

So Jake's plan relied on one simple concept.

Just don't fight him.

He shared his idea, and Miranda seemed somewhat receptive, even if there were things to refine. They talked for a while longer until Miranda made him aware the Alabaster Crimstone Snake had left, finally prompting her to ask:

"Jake, just to make sure, you have not named this snake yet? Not even in your own head?" Miranda asked.

"No?" Jake asked with confusion. But he soon got it and smiled. *"If you want me to think of a name, just ask, and I wi-*

"Definitely not. Actually, wait... no, do think of a name, but I have sole discretion when it comes to accepting it or not, alright? And promise me not to share your name ideas with anyone else but me until the choice is final, alright?" Miranda said.

"I guess?" Jake answered, thinking she was overdoing it. He had gotten better at naming things; one just had to look at Sandy. Sandy was a real name! That was definitely an improvement, right?

Unluckily, Jake did not have more time to talk as his ride arrived to eat him up once more. Jake said his temporary goodbyes to Miranda, forgetting to mention his "faster way back than expected" was within the stomach of a massive C-grade worm and going on his merry way.

For his plan to succeed – or for any plan to get more probable – he needed one thing. Levels and power.

It was power-hunting time.

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Chapter 536: Schemers

Across the planet, the chaos brought on by the United Cities Alliance and Ell'Hakan continued. Beasts attacked like never before, and millions died within only a week as many settlements fell, unprepared and too weak to resist. Those who held on still took losses, and the survivors all had a newfound hatred. The work that had been made to establish positive relations between monsters and humanity was thoroughly broken.

The problem was that people did not see the actions of beasts as those of individuals but that of a monolith - as a tribe. They put all monsters in a box and vilified them in their minds as aggressors. This was not much different from what humans did to other humans before the system. People loved to hate others, and it was just easier to hate an entire religion, country, or appearance than recognize that each person was an individual making their own choices.

And this feeling was reciprocated by the monsters.

They, too, viewed humanity as something they wanted to wipe out. Their reasons varied, but their goal was the same. Some saw humans as destroyers, having ruined their natural habitats before the systems and thus nothing but a scourge on the planet. Others had been mistreated and abused by humans all their lives. A small part just looked down on humans as weak and pathetic creatures not worth keeping alive. Others still did not truly care much; they just wanted to hunt without restrictions. As with any good hate group, they didn't need a unified ideology, just shared hatred.

With every beast that killed a human, humanity's hatred of beasts grew. With every human that killed a beast, the beasts' resentment of humanity grew. One would maybe think that monsters getting angry at humans killing beasts while defending themselves wasn't fair, but how was it different from what humans usually did?

Human hunting parties entered the territory of monsters often. They killed hundreds of beasts or elementals or whatever they came across that gave them experience before retreating to their cities. It was so normalized no one questioned it. The monsters didn't

even question it, as fighting and the law of the jungle were just the rules of the multiverse.

What they did question was the Fallen King then coming and trying to tell them they had to leave *all* human settlements alone. Leaving some alone was fine, but all of them? Would the humans have accepted the same terms? A unilateral ban from entering and hunting monsters within their homes?

The answer was no.

This was not a question of right or wrong but simply reality. Humans and monsters both needed to kill to progress, and humans had a tendency to want to avoid killing other humans, making them target monsters instead. This was how the universe had worked for Eras, and there would never truly be peace between all the different races. Especially when the enlightened races kept their sense of superiority, thinking the life of a human or elf was more valuable than that of a beast. War and conflict were simply inevitable. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT novel.fire.net

Unless, of course, a powerful enough influence could make humanity and all monsters back down and search for prey elsewhere than their own planet.

Miyamoto felt the token in his spatial storage vibrate once more and decided to take it out this time. He had chosen to wait out and assess the situation before making any further moves, but it appeared it was time to discuss their circumstances.

“Ms. Wells, to what do I owe the pleasure?” he answered, allowing her to take the initiative.

“It pleases me to know you are doing well, Sword Saint. To the world, you are still considering missing in action and potentially dead,” she said.

“I am aware,” he answered as he smiled to himself. *“And it is intentional. So please, do me a favor and keep it as such.”*

“Alright?” Ms. Wells said with some confusion. *“May I know what happened after you were presumably attacked?”*

“A fight followed by information,” the Sword Saint answered as he remembered what had happened.

Two powerful individuals charged at him. The Sword Saint had his blade ready as they circled him. Both of them were melee combatants like him, and from their small initial clash, he became fully aware they would not be easily taken down.

One of them wielded two blades of ice while the other was a pure fighter without any obvious magical characteristics. Seeing the opponent using ice magic, he quickly

realized these people were aware of his abilities. One of the greatest counters to water was not extreme heat but extreme cold. It would make his attacks rigid and impede the flow. This opponent was here to counter him directly; that much was evident.

Flanked on each side, he blocked one as he stepped back to avoid the blow of the other. His original assessment that they were about as strong as the Judge from the Court of Shadows was correct. The difference was that they were both already using their boosting skills, wanting to finish this battle quickly, and even if that made their strength explosive, it was far from the level of the Judge when he went all out. They were more at the level of his usual fighting strength.

Blades of ice began to revolve around him as the ice swordsman took a step back, and the other engaged with a curved sword in each hand. The man's speed was impressive, and the Sword Saint was forced to block until one of the ice blades attacked from behind. Angling himself a bit, he was hit in the lower part of his back. A non-vital area.

Using his boosting skill, he only activated it at a low level. His opponents still attacked with an upper hand as they pushed themselves to their extremes. The Sword Saint took injury after injury as trump cards were revealed from the other side, and soon enough, he was blasted back as his left arm was severed.

"We expected more," one of them said as he approached with the tip of his ice blade pointed at the Sword Saint. Injured and a bit tired, but otherwise, fine. The man had continually frozen and interrupted Miyamoto's magic and stopped his attacks for the other side to get the advantage.

"Why are you even doing this... the Noboru Clan is not part of any religious faction. We are an independent force. Would the United Cities Alliance not want us on their side?" the Sword Saint asked with heaved breath.

"No one cares about your pathetic little clan," the other attacker spoke. "You are the only one worth killing here. With you gone, they will fall into shambles, and we are already aware of the internal struggles your family faces. It won't be hard to convince them to back the alliance with their Patriarch dead and gone."

The Sword Saint nodded before answering with gusto. "I will never let that happen!"

He released a massive wave of water that pushed back the two of them and temporarily allowed him to escape their sights and retreat. The old man ran through the plans, but he was simply too slow. A blade of ice flew from behind and hit him in the shin, making him fall over. He rolled to the side to avoid the non-magical warrior's scimitar but still took a nasty cut. In a final gamble, he tried to take down one of them with him, but he was too slow. He managed to cut the shoulder of the ice warrior but was stabbed in the heart by a scimitar. The old man tried to do something, but before he could, the second scimitar swept up and severed his head.

“Got the notification?” the ice warrior asked.

“Yes,” the second warrior nodded.

Acknowledging, the ice warrior took out a token and seemed to communicate through it. A few seconds passed before he smiled. “It has been conveyed. Let’s get out of here before-“

The corpse of the old man suddenly moved as a spear appeared in his hand. The second warrior was stabbed in the back as his eyes opened wide. The corpse quickly stood up as he healed, a head regrowing and his body changing. Rather than an old man, a figure with red eyes and black hair stood there. He smiled as his fangs showed.

Swiftly, the ice warrior took out the token again, but before he could relay anything, his arm flew into the air, still holding the token. He screamed as he turned and saw the Sword Saint standing there, an arm still missing but otherwise looking unharmed.

The ice warrior tried to retaliate as the old man bent his knees.

“Thousand Waves Slash.”

A wall of ice appeared but was cut through like paper as the warrior was blasted back. The Sword Saint followed up and landed several blows before cutting off the head of the man he identified as a Nahoom. Turning to the other warrior who was struggling with the former Monarch of Blood, he quickly went over and teamed up, cutting off the man’s legs and arms.

After knocking him out but keeping him alive, the Sword Saint looked at the former Monarch, who sat down on the grass, breathing heavily.

“Who would have thought me acting as your doppelganger for so long would come into play like this,” Iskar, the former Monarch of Blood, said.

Miyamoto and Iskar had, for a long time, acted together. Both were old souls and had a lot in common, with Iskar having a wealth of knowledge stashed away in his head. He did not remember everything, but with time, the former A-grade recalled details. His existence was an interesting one due to its link with the Divine item left by Sanguine, but he was a fully-fledged lifeform when outside of it, and not a weak one either.

His skill set was incredibly vast and varied and included high-level illusion magic coupled with hypnosis. Enough to fool the two attackers into thinking they had actually killed Miyamoto.

“Let us leave,” the Sword Saint said as he saw movement from the direction of the Noboru Clan. He planned on staying dead in the eyes of the public, and leaving behind only one unrecognizable corpse should keep up the illusion, at least for a time.

Moreover, leaving just one corpse meant he had a prisoner - a prisoner likely holding a lot of valuable information.

Miyamoto explained this to Ms. Wells, not believing there was a need to keep it a secret from her. Jake trusted her, and so far, she had shown herself worthy of that trust.

"I don't understand why you need to fake your own death even to your clan... do you fear it would leak if they knew?" the City Lord of Haven asked.

"Yes and no. The main reason is quite a bit more straightforward. The Noboru Clan is not truly a faction but just people rallying behind me; at least, it has begun to feel like that. They require me to be their Patriarch to continue their existence and rely on me far too much. Moreover, there have been more internal struggles as we have grown. There were even those pushing to join the United Cities Alliance. So I wish to see how the clan will act when I am believed dead. I want to see if the clan is worthy of keeping alive as it currently is or if I will have to reconsider my approach," the Sword Saint answered.

Miyamoto had considered it for a long time. After his duel with Jake in the Treasure Hunt, he realized he needed to be more selfish and truly pursue what he cared about. His power would be the power of the clan, but it had become too much. They had begun to treat him as more than an elder. However, he still did not want to rule the clan with an iron fist. He could have, but he wanted autonomy and for himself to have some freedom. He wanted to know his clan would not crumble if he was to die.

After a bit, Ms. Wells asked: *"There is bound to be an internal struggle... and with the recent beast attacks, many will die. The Noboru Clan may not survive without you."*

"Death and life are simple realities of the system. No faction is not built upon a mountain of corpses, and should the Noboru Clan fall simply due to my absence, then as much as it pains me, then I must recognize it is unworthy of existing. Even if it ceases to be, our heritage will not. However, should the clan come out whole, it will be stronger than ever," Miyamoto explained.

"I see," she simply answered, recognition in her voice. She seemed to understand.

"Now, Ms. Wells, I do not believe you contacted me only for an exchange of information. I have interrogated one of my ambushers and learned of their plans to make Arthur the World Leader, as well as Ell'Hakan's desire to defeat Jake. From what you tell me, Jake also seems to have a plan, so please, do share. What do you intend to do to handle this Ell'Hakan? He seems like a tricky one to deal with," the Sword Saint asked.

"So, Jake proposes to..."

She explained, and the Sword Saint could not help but smile after she was done. It was simple, and it gave the Sword Saint something he would very much like. Hence, he was more than on board. *"It shall be my honor and privilege."*

Vilastromoz observed as Jake began his hunting spree, not wanting to interrupt. He was busy with his own matters anyway as he also had to make preparations for what was to come. This was part of the reason he had not contacted Jake for a while, though the primary one was that he was unsure how Jake would react. The god had to be honest... feeling genuine worry about how someone else would react was something he hadn't felt in a long time, and he had kind of missed it.

The Viper would lie if he said he didn't feel a slight level of responsibility for what was happening, but he would equally be lying if he said he didn't think this conflict was a good thing. Strife would push one forward, and a slight level of urgency could be healthy at times. Not that he feared Jake would become complacent as he seemed to still have the same internal drive for progressing he had the day they met, but it could help speed him up without any negative consequences.

Simply forcing Jake to think a bit differently was good. He would meet many who were like Ell'Hakan in that they didn't have any interest in fighting him in a fair fight but still wanted to make trouble for him. The Viper had many such foes during his rise to power and even had many such foes now. He also understood that this entire conflict with Yip of Yore's Chosen was entirely due to Jake being the Chosen of the Viper.

Yip and his Chosen relied on stories. Legends. It gave them power, made them progress, and the Viper saw the mirror image that was being made. Because he knew that Jake was not the only one being targeted in this conflict. While the Chosen wanted to fight and likely kill Jake to prove himself and his Path...

So did Yip of Yore aim to kill a Primordial to prove his. And Villy was his chosen target for that - a logical one too. He was the perfect target if he evaluated it a bit himself. Yip needed a villain, and the Viper was quite villainous when he wanted to be if he had to say so himself. The Viper also knew that Yip was not doing this haphazardly. Everything was part of a greater framework. A larger story.

A grand epic, if you will.

Honestly, it made Vilastromoz a bit sad he was targeted. Because while Yip and his Chosen were very similar, Jake and Vilastromoz were most certainly not. They were nearly exact opposites.

Jake preferred to face his opponents head-on. As for Vilastromoz? Well, so far, all he had done since returning from seclusion had been to handle his issues head-on. But this was not because he preferred to do it this way; it was just simpler and faster.

However, if he faced an opponent worth the effort?

That is why he found it sad that Yip had chosen him. Sad that people had forgotten who he truly was.

Because if Yip of Yore thought he was a meticulous planner, he had not met the schemer known as the Malefic Viper.

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Chapter 537: Rebuilding & Lots of Killing

Countless factions dominated the multiverse, but few were as unique as the Risen. They were the living dead, and that came with both bonuses and demerits. Some bonuses included a natural lifespan equal to your True Soul's natural lifespan, meaning you would live as long as possible, and aging would only come to pass due to the person wanting it. Combat-wise, they truly did not have many differences from other enlightened races, besides some changed natural affinities and stats. They were neither stronger nor weaker, and history had also shown that their natural average level of talent was roughly comparable to humans and elves.

As for demerits, the largest inherent one was probably their inability to procreate naturally. Two Risen could not simply make a child. Instead, it took a far more complicated process. It was possible, mind you, but not as easy, and it required a specially created item that both would-be parents poured a part of their essence into. Even then, it wasn't like an actual child would be born and grow up normally. They would be born in their full adult form, albeit with a nascent consciousness like that of a child.

Their other way to procreate was for others to willingly become Risen. However, this, too, was not as simple as some common misunderstandings and prejudices that existed in the multiverse had made it out to be. One of the most widespread beliefs was that the Risen could forcefully create more Risen by raising the dead.

It did not work like that. The only way for someone to become a Risen was to willingly accept to become one, and only while still alive. You had to participate in a ritual, during which the system would allow you to change. It *always* required the person to willingly choose, and the ritual would even fail if the individual taking part was being mentally manipulated in any form.

Sadly many still thought the Risen could forcefully make more of themselves by killing others. True, they were talented in raising undead, but while the Risen were classified as undead, no raised undead could ever be classified as Risen or an enlightened species. They were all monsters, unable to possess a class or profession.

Most undead in the multiverse naturally hated the living and wanted to consume them. They were scourges and natural disasters more than anything. A beast or elemental would not choose to hunt down those significantly weaker than themselves for no reason. Meanwhile, an A-grade undead monster would gladly consume several planets with nothing more powerful than a C-grade on it just to kill everything there. This was also due to another trait of the undead – a lack of intelligence. They were, more often than not, still only pure instinct, even when reaching S-grade.

So publicly making an enemy of the Risen for also being undead was easy as pies. And the Risen knew.

Casper and Priscilla had known it too, which was why they had planned for the eventuality that they would be pushed out of Earth from the very beginning. This was why they had wanted to create the dungeon, as it was part of their plan, and when the Treasure Hunt happened, they got the chance to get a damaged World Core by combining all the fragments they had found there.

It was a golden opportunity they had leaped at, and it had gone far better than expected. It had truly given them a path of survival far more viable than any of their other plans, and while Casper did admit he would miss Earth, he had no regrets.

Casper was flying far in the air as he stared at the black skies with only a few clouds here and there. No stars were visible, but they would work on that with time. Down below were rolling hills of soil, and familiar grass was growing, identical to that of Yalsten.

Turning his head, he saw the edges of the realm and knew it was still slightly unstable. The usable area was only a few hundred square kilometers right now, but it would expand with time as everything stabilized - as the tree grew.

So, what had the Risen done?

They had made a new world using the World Core from the Treasure Hunt. One that now existed within the infinite void, like Yalsten, but this one was still linked to the ninety-third universe.

Each world had to be anchored somewhere in the real universe, or it would be forever lost in the infinite void, effectively killing everyone within as they had no way in or out. Unless someone managed to become a god, that is, but chances of that were non-existent. These anchors could be detected and destroyed by outside forces if they located them all and doom all who resided in the world. So the Risen had done something smart. Something classified as clever use of system mechanics.

The anchor had been placed within the cave they had then turned into a dungeon, effectively making it inaccessible as when the dungeon was created, a barrier would form that was impenetrable to nearly anyone. The way anchors worked meant that one

could still get out as the anchor was more of a coordinate, and if they wanted to teleport out, they just had to place the person a bit to the side of this coordinate, thus having them outside. As for if they didn't, then the person would just appear within the cave, but oops, the cave is now the location of a dungeon, so the system would kindly relocate you just outside the dungeon entrance.

Oh, also, even if their world had been cut off, they still had one final failsafe: Casper himself. He carried the Blessing of the Blightfather, so even if they were lost within the infinite void, the Blightfather could use the Blessing as a beacon to locate them.

Casper could never claim this had been his own ingenious idea. It truly wasn't something revolutionary either, as many factions had done this, and truth be told, there were still ways to mess them up. Just not for anyone on Earth. Not yet.

There was still the risk of Earth being taken over and them just becoming sitting ducks, which was when the other part of the plan came into effect. The Risen had worked on raising ghosts since the day they returned from the Tutorial and made the city. Ghosts had a few properties, but one of them was that they were pure energy. Pure energy and very effective rocket thrusters in large enough numbers.

That's right, the dungeon that the Risen had made had already left Earth right after they evacuated everyone. The Holy Church had been busy still advancing to catch a large sphere rock being lifted into the air by hundreds of thousands of ghosts. By the time they reacted, the sphere was already too high. Every single ghost had died during the ascent, and there were many risks that they would be stopped by beasts or that the ghosts would die in the hazardous environment closer to the edge of the atmosphere during the journey, but they had made it.

Made it and were now nothing but a rock floating through space like another unsuspecting meteor. Right now, they had no direction or control, but with time they would. This world was one they would use long term and would be one of the new major home bases of the Risen in the new universe.

With the former Root of Eternal Resentment planted and hopefully able to create a new tree, Casper was

hopeful. They had the backing of the Blightfather and were currently working hard on a teleporter directly from the hidden world and to the Ghostlands, entirely circumventing the ninety-third universe and still giving them a place to go and progress.

Casper smiled as he saw Priscilla busy far below. Lyra appeared at his side, joining him as they saw their new city slowly being constructed. They only had around a hundred thousand people with them, and space was a bit tight, but they would live. Live and prosper.

To commemorate where they had come from, they had also picked a very unoriginal but fitting name for their world:

New Yalsten.

Jake sat chilling on top of a massive tree as he stared out onto the ocean in front of him. Sandy was busy eating an entire field of fruit trees, and Jake didn't bother the worm as he smiled to himself. Life had been good.

By now, it had been about a month since he had his first talk with Miranda after she reached the Grand Mangrove River, and the thing that surprised him the most was that nothing had surprised him during this time. At least he did learn some stuff that explained things.

The Pylon of Civilization at Haven had been hidden even more than before. It had not been moved, but Miranda had created a decoy Pylon of sorts and placed it under her main office, sealed beneath her ritual chamber. She told him that she had felt people try to get to it, but nobody had succeeded yet. Jake had not even known about her doing this, but honestly, it made sense. Not even Ell'Hakan would think Jake had hidden the Pylon under his lodge in a nearly unprotected state.

They had also discussed Miranda talking with the Sword Saint and the old man being on board, having even faked his own death using the power of the former Monarch of Blood. However, she had failed to get in contact with Casper as the token he had was no longer reachable – he was still around, mind you, just out of range. Where he was, Miranda didn't know, but from what they had learned, the territory of the Risen was effectively gone, having been successfully invaded by the Holy Church and United Cities Alliance. At least, that was the official story. Jake wasn't entirely sure what to think after Miranda told him there was now a big hole in the ground where the Risen had once been.

Jake was sad to see Casper gone, but he should still be alive. Villy had at least told him that. Well, okay, not alive, technically, but still around.

Caleb had been suckered into working for the United Cities Alliance, and honestly, Jake didn't really see the problem. He was just doing his job, and it wasn't like what he did would hurt Jake or those he cared about. The Court of Shadows was a business, and Jake knew that Caleb refusing could only result in him having to leave the Court.

The Court of Shadows was what could be classified as a true neutral faction in that they only cared about money. Villy even mentioned that if Jake wanted to slap some fat stacks on the table, he could just hire them to also target the United Cities Alliance, including Arthur himself. However, there would be one thing holding them back in the future.

A rule they had was that they would not accept the task of assassinating the leader or someone part of the leadership structure of a planet they operated on. This was simply a concession to allow them to stay on planets without conquering them themselves. Jake also reckoned this was why Arthur was fine with keeping them around. If the United Cities Alliance won and he became World Leader, they would not target him but only function as an asset operating out of Earth as there was an element of deterrence if people knew the Court had a branch stationed somewhere.

So even if Jake was not a fan of what was happening, he understood why it was like that and wouldn't blame Caleb for what he chose. He did what was best for his family – their family. Jake also knew that while his brother believed in him, it was best he made decisions for his nuclear family first and foremost. Maja and Jake's little nephew were his priority, and if Jake somehow ended up dead or forced to leave the planet, Caleb needed the Court to back him.

It was all complicated. Valhal had also taken a complicated stance on the matter. One of absolute inaction. He was informed that they had been hired or brought on by several cities to help defend them from the attacking beasts, but that was it. Villy had once more talked with Jake and offered that they did have an approach they could take if they wanted: offer them a deal too. But Jake had no interest in this either.

No, he had been thinking and was beginning to make some realizations. Some things he had to do if he wanted to stay on Earth or even be able to call it a home he could visit. Things to allow those he cared about to find safety there and not have it be what it currently was: a mixture of forces with era-old conflicts that would never get along, with some newborn factions tossed in that also vied for control. Jake would have to make some decisions.

Anyway, the Holy Church was also still acting all shady, and from what he had heard, they were planning something of their own. The Noboru Clan had fallen into shambles over the last month with lots of internal conflicts, and it was all messy as hell. Speaking of messy, even the Church apparently had problems, and Jake had not heard a single peep about or from Jacob. It was like he was gone. Then again, something must have happened because he would definitely not have authorized an attack on the Risen.

Another person Jake had not seen or heard from was one other quite unique character on the planet. Eron. The now third person with a Bloodline residing on the planet after Ell'Hakan had arrived was notably absent from everything. Miranda had tried to figure out what was happening, but she had no idea... all she knew was that no one had seen him for quite a while.

Jake had been curious enough to ask Villy only to get an unexpected response. Not even the Primordial had any idea where he was and found himself unable to locate him. People with Bloodlines were harder to find by default, but Villy clarified that he should still be locatable. Unless, of course, he had been hidden by someone at or around the level of Villy himself. It was enough to interest Villy and make him do some independent

research, and what the Viper found out was that he was definitely gone from Earth and likely from the ninety-third universe. As for where he had gone, along with all of his followers, Jake had no idea. Truth be told, Jake had never really talked with or about him that much outside of their brief interaction in the Treasure Hunt. Eron had just been doing his own thing until he was suddenly gone.

Oh, and as for the question if he was dead... Eron? Dead? Yeah, Jake definitely couldn't see that happening, and his guts also told him the insane healer was still kicking.

To summarize, a lot had happened over the last month, and Jake could probably have been back in Haven already if he had wanted to. He had purposefully waited and wanted to make sure everyone was ready. He had even managed to get word to the Fallen King about his plans, with the Unique Lifeform now on board. Though the Fallen King had apparently not at all been in a rush either but oddly happy with the stalemate that he faced with another Unique Lifeform. Then again, how often could someone like the Fallen King find someone of equal level that was his equal? Well, every day, if he stayed around Jake. Not that Jake would bother to fight him all the time. He was too busy killing to just do fighting.

During this month, Jake had not slacked off at all. He did discover the oddity that it felt like he progressed faster again for some reason. In between killing n C-grades or while waiting for Sandy to get a treasure, Jake would usually either talk with Miranda, recover from a fight, ponder on some issue, or do alchemy. Alchemy was what he did if none of the others were required, which is why he was surprised at getting three entire levels.

*****DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 186 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 187 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

*****DING! Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 184 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

*****DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 188 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

A level every ten days from not even being that focused on alchemy was odd. Granted, Jake had primarily been crafting items and not really experimenting, but it was still a lot. Jake had even spent a bit of time checking in on sim-Jake and pondering how to get his last three "of the Malefic Viper" upgrades when he was meditating anyway. No real progress there, though. Some initial ideas began to form, but he was not really that focused on them.

His true focus had been hunting and improving his class skills. As for how that had gone? Well, in the hunting department, the levels spoke for themselves.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 182 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 193 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

And with that naturally came the race levels.

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 185 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 190 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

12 levels gained in his class and 3 in his profession over a span of thirty or so days was incredibly good and nearly brought him back to his early D-grade days. Jake had been surprised several times at getting a level, even if he had killed a few dozen C-grades by now - C-grades more powerful than anything he had faced before. Follow current NOVELS ON [novel•fire•net](http://novel.fire.net)

Relentless Hunt was truly a powerful skill and gave Jake far more damage than he had initially expected. It allowed him to break stalemates, land unexpected blows, and far more easily control the flow of a battle. Moreover, the longer he kept the fight going, the larger his advantage became if he didn't need to use the Hunting Momentum.

He was also beginning to realize that the skill was quite a bit stronger than it was meant to be. For several reasons. Its innate balance came from assuming one would still get hit once in a while, hence slowing the generation of Hunting Momentum. Something Jake was very good at avoiding due to his Bloodline.

Additionally, then it was probably not intended for the person using it to have a Perception stat at the level of Jake's. He had, of course, tossed every free point gained in it without any regrets and was now close to having thirteen thousand Perception, making it nearly as high as his two second-highest stats combined. Stats that were already highly inflated due to Jake's many stat amplifiers.

Jake truly felt justified now in going so hard on Perception and proving all the naysayers wrong. Perception was, and would forever be, the best stat.

As for class skills... Jake had gone even further above and beyond expectations, and the results spoke for themselves.

Naturally, his success was partly due to his high Perception.

Because. Again.

Perception best stat.

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Chapter 538: Chronicles of Skill Upgrades

Upgrading skills was always a difficult and time-consuming process. You had so much to evaluate and so much to do, and Jake's method of upgrading was considered even harder than the standard approach. He insisted on only doing it during combat and only reflected on how to upgrade the skills on a surface level in between fights.

This would usually be an incredibly ineffective, if not downright horrible, method as it carried so many more risks. Especially when you did this only while fighting enemies at a higher grade. However, to Jake, this added element of danger only made him focus more. It allowed him to truly feel and experience the movements of energy in a more profound way, and his senses felt sharpened. Probably because they partly were.

It was not a joke either when he said Perception was a big reason why he could upgrade the skills the way he did. Rather than do a long time of experimenting and theorizing, he could feel and perceive the skills and how they worked and potentially find snags and room for improvement, along with discovering potential areas to build upon for an upgrade. Perhaps more importantly, it allowed him to faster rule out dead ends and ideas that were too hard to pull off with Jake's current level of skill and grade.

As for how many skills Jake had managed to upgrade during this month? Three in total. Each upgrade used different methods and approaches but resulted in the same: Jake growing stronger. All were skills parts of Jake's usual toolbox and perhaps his most essential ones in a fight.

He had been a busy hunter, and the first skill was one he used all the time.

Splitting Arrow, or more accurately, Enhanced Splitting Arrow. Currently sitting at rare rarity since just after Jake evolved to D-grade, where he had upgraded it from

uncommon rarity to allow the split to work with his Arcane Hunter's Arrows. That upgrade had allowed the arrow to split and retain innate magical properties.

It was a simple yet effective skill.

[Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow strikes with the power of the original. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Enhanced Splitting Arrow.

Paths of improvement? Several. Jake had many ideas. Some of the first that sprung to mind was to allow it to clone even the poison on the arrows and other external magical properties. As an example, then Jake could not split an Arcane Powershot as the Powershot added properties to the arrow that were not innate. Okay, while he could probably still split it, all it would do was make the attack weaker, so it wasn't worth it.

However, this method of improvement quickly hit a snag in that one of the biggest strengths of Splitting Arrow was speed and how subtle it was to use. If Jake wanted to make it so much more powerful, the skill would require a lot more energy to use as Jake did pay mana and stamina when he split arrows, and dependent on the poison, the cost could get insane. Sleeping Night Toxin would be so darn expensive to clone. Jake was not even sure he had the mana pool for it. So he quickly moved away from doing that.

Which is when Jake remembered his most important motto. Keep things simple. Why would he need to really change the skill? He just needed to improve it. Make it better than what it was. So why not just do that? Focus on improving every aspect there already was – something that would become a theme with these three upgrades. For Splitting Arrow, he felt like he needed to truly understand the process that caused the arrows to split and improve upon that.

Jake did have utterly bonkers Perception, so it was only right to put it to use. He thoroughly analyzed the moment his arrows split and the entire process from start to end. Since gaining it, the skill had gotten a lot stronger already. The resource cost was lower per split than the day he got it, and he had an easier time splitting more arrows than before. This alone was perhaps enough for an upgrade if he pursued it more actively, but Jake went in another direction. One he also believed would shore up even more room for future upgrades and improvement. A path where Jake had taken a lot of inspiration from the Sword Saint and the duel they had. The result had been better than expected.

[Splitting Arrow Rain (Epic)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow has variable strength and can be further split into less potent versions. If the original arrow is shot upwards, it can be split to create a far more potent arrow rain. Adds

a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Splitting Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an arrow rain.

Jake did not have a good area of effect skill before besides just a lot of arcane magic. Now, Jake had what could thoroughly be classified as a disaster-level attack. Pre-upgrade, each Splitting Arrow had the power of the original, but with this version, Jake could vary it. He could make ten arrows with the power of the original or a hundred arrows with about twenty percent of the originals... because, yes, they actually retained more power than math would otherwise suggest.

The upgrade had come during a fight with a massive water elemental while crossing a small part of one of the oceans of Earth. It had been larger than any creature Jake had faced before and relied solely on its massive resource pools to survive. Jake had bombarded it with thousands of arrows every few seconds and shown it that he, too, had a lot of resources to spend. And mana potions.

Something had to be said about watching a rain of arrows that each exploded upon impact. With a bit of practice, Jake could truly make it look like it rained as he shot the arrows into the air and let them rain down on his foe. His archery skill was also an important aspect of this skill, allowing him to bend the original arrow and make it fall faster and at slightly different angles than just straight down.

The elemental had died simply due to being bombarded for long enough and from far enough up in the air – because, yes, Jake just flying really high up in the air and him then shooting down counted as creating an arrow rain. Granted, Jake would have been screwed against the elemental if it had just run away underwater, but Sandy had done Cosmic Generis Worm stuff and made it so the elemental could not flee underwater by messing with space itself to effectively solidify the liquid. The more Jake spent time with the worm, the more he realized how messed up of a creature Sandy was.

Anyway. Splitting Arrow was the first skill Jake improved, and once that was done, he moved on to another staple.

Arcane Powershot.

If there was one skill Jake would say truly was the core of his fighting style, it had to be this. Jake had gotten Powershot all the way back at level 10, right after he got out of the Challenge Dungeon. Since then, it had been his best archery skill, if Jake said so himself, but more than anything, it was *his* skill. He had upgraded it twice himself already, and out of all his skills, he didn't have one he felt more familiar with. Without lying, he would probably want to keep Arcane Powershot over all other archery skills he currently had, even if that would be illogical.

Either way, it was probably his best combat skill. All others had conditions or only worked well when used with others, but where would he be without Powershot?

Probably at a far lower level, if not dead. It was only right to give the skill some love, and this time around, Jake took a note out of a Primordial's book: Valdemar.

The thing about skill upgrades was that there were several ways to do it. The most usual way was to add more to the skill, like how Jake had just improved Splitting Arrow to be able to split more and added the arrow rain function. But there was another way.

Refine and improve. Do not change the core of the skill itself but simply make everything about it better. Concepts did not even need to be added; you just had to better understand those that were already there. Out of all the Primordials, Valdemar was the best at this. He was a simple man, and as a simple man, he had simple skills.

His go-to was a simple chop. Jake had seen this simple chop smash through the barriers of the Malefic Viper and tear his flesh and bones apart as space and reality itself bent and buckled under his power. This was not simply because he was strong but because of the skill the would-be Primordial used. It looked like a common rarity skill, but in reality, it had likely been mythical or beyond during their confrontation at S-grade.

Jake had gone in a similar direction as Valdemar and thoroughly analyzed Arcane Powershot. As mentioned before, Jake was already intimately familiar with the skill and only sought to improve every aspect. Arcane Powershot was inherently a bit chaotic due to the destructive arcane energies, but that was primarily due to Jake's lacking control. The more stable energy he could actively control and pour in, the more destructive energy he could stabilize and infuse into the attack. The end result would still look chaotic, and the purpose was still to push himself to his utmost limits – something Arcane Powershot had not really allowed him to do for a while.

He wanted to go back to those days when he felt his own muscles burn, his skin peel off from destructive energies, and his bow struggled to not break apart from the sheer level of energy infused. After days of slowly refining the skill and dozens of dead C-grades that became victims to his Path, the system rewarded his efforts.

[Arcane Powershot (Epic)] – Stamina the fuel – Mana the guide – Arcane the power. Evolved from Infused Powershot, it now uses a higher concept of mana to amplify itself. The higher the magnitude of the charge, the greater the stamina and mana expenditure. Arcane Powershot's power is dependent on the charging duration, but due to your Arcane Mana's inherent power, the base power without any charging is significantly higher than Infused Powershot. Adds a small bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Strength as well as a medium bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Arcane Powershot.

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[Arcane Powershot (Ancient)] – Stamina the fuel – Mana the guide – Arcane the power. Using your arcane energy, charge a devastating attack using a bow that pushes your body, will, and control to their limits. The higher the magnitude of

the charge, the greater the stamina and mana expenditure. Arcane Powershot's power is dependent on the charging duration but has a powerful baseline due to your arcane affinity. Adds a medium bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Strength as well as a substantial bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Arcane Powershot.

There was no interesting fight that spawned this upgrade. Jake had not made it to battle a certain foe like the massive water elemental. The upgrade had come during one of his many times using it to first engage a foe, and everything had just clicked and fallen into place.

The change in the description was intriguing. Primarily how nothing had really changed functionality-wise, yet it was quite different word-wise. All references to Infused Powershot were gone and now replaced with their own text, indicating that the skill was now more divorced from Infused Powershot than before. The changes were so few that not even the skill name had changed; the rarity had just upgraded.

Did Jake complain about this? No. No, he did not. His only possible area of criticism was in that there was still no inherent Perception-scaling in the skill, but it was acceptable for now. The skill did still kind of scale with Perception simply because it empowered attacks that did scale with the stat.

In that fight where it had clicked, the energy had moved more smoothly than ever before. First, a stream of pure stability had entered his muscles, bones, skin, and bow. A fraction of a second later, the destructive energies had come, but Jake had protected himself already. The two energies interacted and rapidly reached equilibrium as Jake mixed stamina and mana far more efficiently than before he began practicing the upgrade. His efforts were rewarded as the skill upgraded and system assistance kicked in.

The Arcane Powershot Jake had released had been by far the strongest he had ever used outside of one using Hunting Momentum, and Jake was already beginning to see a path to a goal he had formed for himself. Something he had done in E-grade and wanted to repeat in D-grade if possible:

Kill prey a grade above himself with a single shot.

The final skill to be upgraded was a bit of a surprise. Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

This one honestly wasn't one Jake had been actively going for; it had just kind of happened as he worked on his other skills. This skill was one of those semi-passive ones that he didn't think actively about, but seeing as it was his source of projectiles ninety-nine percent of the time, he probably should consider it more. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [novel**fire**net](#)

The skill was honestly a bit... meh? Like there wasn't much to it, and it barely fit him as an Avaricious Arcane Hunter. It fit the Arcane Hunter part, but there was nothing avaricious about it. The avaricious tag usually just meant he dealt more damage to foes above his own level and sometimes less against those at a lower level. Most often than not, the tradeoff was just that the upgrade *only* worked on those at a higher level, making it a demerit by omission.

What Jake had gone for this time around was to better introduce his class into the skill along with his increased level of control. Once more, he dove into the vast treasure trove of Perception and better analyzed the arrows. Jake had already applied many concepts to them before and was rather used to them. He had found ways to infuse the Stealth Attack Concept better and now worked with Hunting Momentum. and began to practice a bit by first making a bunch of Arrows of the Ambitious Hunter since the skills were a bit similar. The difference was that the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was a singular, far more powerful arrow and one that also contained the concept that allowed him to deal more damage to enemies of a higher level. Jake wanted to take that element and apply it to Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

Jake did have to be careful not to change the skill too much, though, as one of the best things about the Arcane Hunter's Arrows skill was the instantaneous summon. If the skill lost that functionality, he would probably have to switch back to just using a quiver that conjured arrows, which would suck.

As he was trying to work this concept into the arrows, he also began to ask himself why he only ever shot arrows that were either stable or destructive. Like, he knew it was best to go all-in with one element, but why have it be all static? Jake could make stable balls of arcane energy and then make those explode. His arcane bolts were stable at one moment and then destructive the next. That shouldn't be too hard to also do with arrows, right?

Nope, it wasn't. Considering Jake had spent an entire month focusing on upgrading skills, his mindset was already well-adjusted mentally to focus. And after he began to be able to change the equilibrium of the arrows, he tried to also apply the avaricious element. He thought it would be hard, but that very day, he had gotten the upgrade.

[Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)] - A mage and a hunter both, you combine your talents as you conjure your tools of destruction. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to conjure arrows made of highly-condensed arcane mana, focusing on either destruction or stability. A stable arrow will be sharp and durable, while a destructive arrow will explode upon impact. Conjuring arrows consume mana, and the conjuration is instant. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence and Wisdom when using destructive Arcane Hunter's Arrows. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Wisdom and Perception when using stable Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

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[Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Ancient)] - A hunter embracing control over all energy, you combine your talents as you conjure your tools of destruction. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to conjure arrows made of highly-condensed arcane mana, focusing on either destruction or stability during the creation process. A stable arrow will be sharp and durable, while a destructive arrow will explode upon impact. Conjuring arrows consume mana, and the conjuration is instant. The user can change the balance of the energy within the arrow remotely. Deals slightly increased damage against foes at a higher level. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence, Wisdom, and Perception when using Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

Jake had to admit that this one was the cheapest upgrade out of all of them. The amount of system assistance that came in was insane. This was one of those instances where the upgrade path had been pre-determined already, almost just waiting for Jake to discover this way to improve it.

The result was slightly more powerful arrows that were better against foes at a higher level, which naturally meant more damage to everything. The ability to change the balance of destruction and stability on the fly was also a great addition for quite a few reasons. Where Jake applied this upgrade the most was, of course, by shooting a stable arrow, and once it was close to its target, he made it explode. No, Jake could not blow up an arrow already embedded in his foe. He tried, and it failed every time.

This one was still a new addition, and Jake had more science to do before he had figured out everything.

Every single skill upgrade also improved all existing properties, even if new ones were added. This month of hunting had been perhaps the most fruitful period Jake had ever had in D-grade when it came to improving his fighting power. Jake still wanted to improve some things, but time was limited. Soon enough, he would have to resolve everything going on with Earth.

"I am done eating!" Sandy said to Jake as the giant worm flew over, having consumed the entire field of fruit trees. Jake stared out over the ocean and smiled at the worm as he shook his head, telling himself to focus on what lay ahead. They were about to head across the ocean for the first time.

The geography of the Earth had truly changed a lot, and one of the changes was the placement of land and ocean. You could walk nearly anywhere without crossing an ocean as paths connected almost everywhere, but there were still parts without a reliable way across. These narrow points were all they had crossed so far, but to go further, they had to head straight through the open ocean. That, or potentially take a long way around. Jake would lie if he said he wasn't looking forward to their sea trip, at least a little.

On a side note, the "ocean" Jake had crossed with Carmen was not truly an ocean. Jake realized that now. It was more just a massive lake still connected to the ocean, though, by old-world standards, that lake was indeed ocean-sized.

"Did you know that even before the system, we knew so little about what hid in the depths of the ocean? Had so much of it still unexplored? Some even said we knew more of space than the depths of our own seas," he asked his wormy companion.

"No?" Sandy asked as Jake felt the mental version of an eye roll. *"How would I know? I am a Sand Worm. It would be very weird if I knew what you humans were up to before the system."*

"My point is," Jake said, waving off the worm, *"I am looking forward to seeing what monsters may roam over the vast oceans."*

"I am more wondering what kind of tasty things these monsters are hiding away," Sandy said with glee. *"But no going into the water. No way we are doing that."*

"That we agree on," Jake said.

There was no fucking way he would willingly face a C-grade in underwater combat.

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Chapter 539: Sky Whale & Old Acquaintance

Sandy was definitely the most lopsided creature Jake had ever come across. Okay, maybe something like the Termite Hive Queen was equally lopsided, but Sandy was definitely so specialized and weird that it boggled his mind.

Most creatures Jake knew could fight. Like, fighting was a basic skill of the multiverse, right? Jake had yet to come across a single C-grade that couldn't at least fight back in some way. But Sandy? Sandy and fighting were not a thing at all.

And yet, out of every C-grade, Jake did not want to mess with Sandy and make the worm an enemy. Because he was damn sure that would only result in everything he held dear getting eaten and the worm flying away unbothered.

Sandy was good at three things. Like a Sand Worm, a Cosmic Genesis Worm was incredibly good at moving about. Jake thought his new Wings skill was good at escaping, but Sandy had several skills that allowed escape.

Secondly, Sandy was incredibly resilient. The rock-like hide was not for show, and Jake found that even with Arcane Powershot, he could not break through, even if Sandy did say “ouchie” when he hit the massive worm. That was the upgraded version of Arcane Powershot too.

Thirdly was finding and collecting resources. Jake could sense natural treasures due to his boots and Sense of the Malefic Viper, but damn, Sandy was on a whole other level. The worm picked up on things of value up to thousands of kilometers away, and Jake had a feeling it could be even further.

What Sandy was not good at was fighting, but the worm also sucked at detecting enemies. Luckily, or unluckily, it was nearly impossible to find a natural treasure not guarded by something powerful, and Sandy had a good sense of how valuable a natural treasure was and, thus, what kind of power-level one could expect the protector to be. Sometimes Sandy was still wrong, but that is where numbers one and two came in, allowing the worm to just leave. Even the one time they accidentally bumped into a mid-tier C-grade, probably around level 250. Sandy just flew away as the beast chased for a while until it realized it was wasting its time.

All of this is to say that Sandy was only good at running – worming - and eating. But damn, the worm was good at it. He had pimped himself the best ride around, and he clearly felt he was getting closer to Sylphie with every passing day. Now that they found themselves crossing the ocean, Jake also saw an entirely new part of Earth.

Amazingly enough, Jake had avoided underwater combat for the entire first day since they began their journey. This part of the trip would be a lot faster than the one prior as Sandy quickly realized that unless you were willing to dive into the depths, there were few treasures in the open ocean.

Sandy had only found a single island that didn't even have a C-grade on it but only a whole bunch of D-grade birds, making them avoid it. No reason to mess with the local wildlife without any rewards.

This resulted in Jake spending a lot of time within Sandy's stomach just working. He considered working on upgrading some more skills, but without fighting, Jake had a tough time doing it. Jake's entire fighting style was also just so damn instinctual, so trying to take a logical approach and researching a skill seemed too foreign to him.

Thus he focused on alchemy once more. Everything was just peaceful as nothing tried to attack Sandy, and what did try did not have the slightest chance of catching the Cosmic Genesis Worm. At least everything was peaceful until the third day when suddenly Sandy called out to him.

“Out. Now,” the worm said as Jake was thrown out. He didn't even have time to stabilize himself before his eyes opened wide, and he turned his head and saw it.

Still only half-emerged, an utterly massive creature exited the infinitely deep ocean below. Its skin was blue and rough, with fins and a massive tail still hidden in the water below. It looked like a blue whale, just oversized to the extreme, with its emergence reminiscent of a large island choosing to take to the skies.

[Sky Whale – lvl ???]

Jake estimated it to be a bit over ten kilometers long, and it was by far the largest creature Jake had ever encountered. As for if he would fight it? No fucking chance because the aura it gave off was also far above anything.

It was a late-tier C-grade, well-beyond level 300. No matter how many skills Jake upgraded, he had no confidence in facing such a foe. This was also why Jake froze and gritted his teeth as he felt the whale's attention on him. The beast was still over a hundred kilometers away and moving incredibly slowly, but he still saw its stadium-sized eye turn to look at him.

"Sandy, why are we stopping here?" Jake asked the worm.

"It asked for you," Sandy simply answered.

"What?" Jake asked with surprise.

"Said they had been tracking us for a while and wanted to talk... I did want to run, but it seems friendly enough, you know? Anyway, I was promised a treat if I got you out, so get talking," Sandy said, having just sold him out to the massive whale.

As Sandy as said, he felt the whale reach out to him mentally. Jake accepted, wondering what the beast could possibly want from him outside of eating him. Wait, blue whales were herbivores pre-system and pretty chill creatures overall, so maybe this one was too? Let's hope.

"I greet thee, Malefic's Chosen," a deep voice echoed in Jake's head. It sounded like the whale was talking to him from inside a large cave or something. The voice was also obviously male.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Jake responded in kind. He felt no animosity but instead a lot of caution from the massive Sky Whale. Clearly not fearful of his power but his identity.

"If you would allow me to speak frankly?" the whale asked.

"Of course," Jake allowed it, now even more curious.

"We have felt the waves of change for a long time. We, being those who reside within the vast waters of our planet. From the beginning, we were aware a war would come,

and it has already spread to our waters. Factions have been born, and lines formed. I do not mean to ask you for anything, but I do have a request," the massive Sky Whale said.

"What could I possibly do for you that you cannot do yourself? You are the most powerful creature I have seen on this planet so far," Jake also spoke frankly. If the whale asked him for help in a fight or something, then he had to admit he was way out of his depths. Pun intended.

"The ones who will ultimately take control of this planet will not be those like me. When that happens, I fear what our fates will be. Perhaps I myself could leave behind this world and explore the wider universe, but many trusts in me and hide under my fins for protection. What I am asking of you is not assistance in any task but simply to allow us to stay once the time comes. In return, we shall support you in taming the parts of the world you do not wander yourself, Malefic's Chosen," the whale said.

Jake frowned, even more confused. He felt like this all came out of nowhere, and he wasn't even sure how they had tracked him or known he had been inside of Sandy. No one had been observing them besides Villy, and he had a hard time seeing Villy informing a C-grade Sky Whale about him out of the blue. Yet clearly, it had known he was coming and intercepted him. The whale was also aware of the entire Ell'Hakan and United Cities Alliance situation from the sounds of it. He had to know how.

"This has nothing to do with your request, but I have to know... how did you track me and know we were coming? Who told you? How do you even know the situation on land when you reside within the oceans?" he asked the massive whale.

"I apologize sincerely, but I am unable to answer that question. Just know that neither my Patron nor those following me are against you. All we seek is a path of survival and, hopefully, a healthy relationship moving forward with both the Chosen and his Patron. What I can share is that my Patron is no threat to you nor the Malefic One, and he realizes his station," the Sky Whale answered, now fully emerged from the water.

Jake pondered and couldn't figure out who or what it could be. What he could do was guess, and his guess was that the whale had a Patron that wasn't a god Jake had heard of before. Potentially not even that powerful of a god, but simply one that hoped to foster a good relationship with Jake and Villy. Why he had chosen to back Jake and not this Ell'Hakan if he knew both, Jake had no idea. Maybe he just wasn't a moron?

He admired the massive body of the whale for a moment as he wondered how damn deep the oceans had to be to facilitate such an enormous creature to live within it. Much less the treasures it had to hold for such a monster to reach its level of strength.

"I understand," Jake simply answered, feeling the nervousness of the whale decrease.

"I thank you, Malefic's Chosen, and godspeed in your journey. Allow me to offer you and your companion tokens of goodwill," the Sky Whale said as it opened its ridiculously large mouth. Out flew two objects, one being a large pearl the size of a volleyball and the other a crystal container about the size of Jake himself. It looked naturally formed, but an odd dark blue liquid was contained within that instantly triggered Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper. Needless to say, he could not hold himself back from identifying it.

[Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin (Ancient)] – The Lifeblood of a slain Emperor Urchin, an incredibly poisonous creature only found in areas with extremely dense water affinity. Its very blood is toxic to consume and especially toxic if directly injected. The Lifeblood is of a neurotoxin nature. Has many alchemical uses and is especially when combined with other neurotoxins or poisons with the water affinity.

Jake was not one to say no to a good thing and gladly accepted his gift. Sandy had already zoomed forward and eaten the Pearl without a care in the world. Jake shook his head and put the crystal container in his inventory.

"Thank you, from both of us. I am sure we can figure something out if you are sincere. Me knowing who is backing you would also help, but I can accept it if you want to stay secretive," Jake said with a smile

"No, I am the one to thank you. I have been allowed to say that my god is indeed far more aware of you than others, and you have briefly brushed Paths before. You and your Patron have both helped him, perhaps unknowingly, and he wishes to pay back that favor," the Sky Whale said.

Still no idea who it could be, Jake thought. Considering the whale said unknowingly, he assumed it truly was a god he had never met or interacted with. He was also confused at Villy having helped this mystery god. Moreover, he didn't get the feeling the whale was lying. Why would it lie? What would it get out of it?

They exchanged some more pleasantries before the whale took to the air. Yes, rather than dive down underwater, it flew upwards into the vast skies above, doing whatever Sky Whales do.

"That was a nice whale," Sandy said.

"Yeah, very whalecoming," Jake agreed.

"That was bad... like, I can feel you snicker through the connection, and you should not feel proud about that one at all," Sandy scolded him with exasperation. This chapter is updated by

"Whale then, I guess I will fin-ish this conversation here," Jake said, unable to hold back a grin.

The worm did not respond but just cut the connection and gulped him down. Jake did not resist as he was tossed into Sandy's stomach, still smiling proudly to himself.

"I do wonder what god that whale was associated with," Jake wondered out loud. It was a mystery that would likely take a long time to sol-

"Hey Jake, remember that god Karroch that was in charge of your Tutorial? Yeah, that is the god that blessed the whale and apparently a shitload of other beasts on your planet," Villy came in, spoiling the mystery.

"Wait, that beastmaster kind of guy? Why would he say I helped him, and moreover, why would he say you helped him? Well, unless you did help him... is this him paying you back a favor or something?" Jake asked instantly in return.

"Not really. As the god in charge of your Tutorial – despite him being trumped and just working for Eversmile, the Holy Mother, and others – he was the one in charge on paper. Which means he got rewards based on the performance of the participants. You becoming a Progenitor was a major boon to him. Then afterward, I killed the Brimstone Hegemon, an enemy of this god. One can say that we both changed his life. You allowed him to break through and no longer stagnate in strength while I removed an enemy trying to hunt down and kill him," Villy explained. *"He truly got lucky by crossing paths with you and me."*

"Huh, guess you learn something new every day. So, what is he trying to do? Get on your good side through me? Or just repaying some perceived favor?"

"Bit of both from the looks of it. Just let him; Karroch is an unaffiliated god that does not belong to any Pantheon, and honestly, him helping you out can be very beneficial. As a beastmaster, his Blessing can help beasts tremendously, and the guidance he can offer is also better than what most other gods can. You must remember that one of the primary abilities of beastmasters is to make their beasts stronger and allow them to grow in strength. If that Augur is a guide for the enlightened to find their Paths, a good beastmaster is a guide for beasts," Villy further explained.

"I see," Jake said. *"But are these beastmasters not effectively just tamers forcing beasts to fight for them? Is it a good idea for a beast to be influenced by someone like that?"*

"Beastmasters tend to have two classifications of beasts. Tamed beasts and companion beasts. Companion beasts have a connection more like the one you have with the Sylphian Hawk, while the tamed beasts are indeed just expendable chess pieces. Companion beasts are naturally what these beastmasters care about the most and the kind of Records you can expect if blessed by one," Villy said.

"Good to know," Jake said.

“Anyway, I just thought I would let you know as it was something god-related. I shall let you get back to your travels. Keep up the good work,” Villy said before cutting off the connection. It was just a brief talk but rather enlightening. He also failed to hold himself back.

“Hey Sandy, can you do me a favor and tell the Sky Whale to say that I am happy Karroch benefitted from my Path?” Jake asked the worm.

“Who is Karroch?” Sandy asked.

“A mutual acquaintance of the whale and me.”

A few moments passed. Sandy always made the walls transparent and allowed Jake to look outside, and he saw the Sky Whale, now far up in the air, react as Sandy spoke to it. A few more seconds passed.

“The whale talked about you truly being a monster or something like that, which makes no sense as you said you are a human, right? Humans aren’t monsters,” Sandy relayed to him.

Jake just shook his head. *“Who knows? Maybe I am also a giant whale in disguise.”*

“Doubtful, considering whales aren’t scared of water,” Sandy scoffed.

“I am not afraid of water,” Jake argued. *“I just recognize I am not adept in fighting in it.”*

“Sounds like something someone who is scared of water would say.”

“It is not about fear, but-“

“Maybe you are... what was it... a chicken? Yeah, maybe you are a chicken in disguise? Because you sound like a chicken right now,” Sandy cut him off.

“No, it is not that, I-“

“Chickens also don’t like water, right? What a coincidence...”

Their “argument” continued... Jake not realizing he had fallen into a trap – or being too stubborn and prideful to back down - until it was too late.

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

Chapter 540: Teaching How To Human & Angry Shark

She had to ask herself if maybe she was the one who had something wrong with her. Yeah, maybe it was her? Miranda just couldn't see any other way for everything to make sense. Because if it wasn't her, then what the hell was wrong with everyone Jake introduced to her or made friends with?

They had spent over a month in the Grand Mangrove River by now, and things had been mostly fine. Emphasis on mostly. Because the Alabaster Crimstoneye Snake was far more peculiar than Miranda had initially estimated. She had to admit that she was originally afraid of the snake girl and had to constantly be on guard and act confident. Facing a C-grade, especially a mid-tier C-grade, was no easy task for her, but she had to endure it for her comrades.

That was a month ago. After spending a month with the snake?

"No, you can't just eat one of their arms to teach them a lesson. That is not how humans learn at all," she said with exasperation as the C-grade snake sat on her knees, attentively listening.

"But big sis, what if they are being really bad? Like, at least eat the hand, right? It grows back, so it isn't that bad, is it?" the snake girl argued.

"It is still a no," Miranda said with a sigh. "If you want to be a good ruler, do not use fear as your only tool. That is what idiots do, and you aren't an idiot."

"Okay..." the C-grade said as she seemed to reconsider what kind of teaching methods would be good for humans. Ah, but not human adults, mind you. The snake girl seemed to be under the impression that the best way to teach human kids was corporal punishment. Some idiot had mentioned to her that kids sometimes had to touch a hot stove to learn it was hot, so the brilliant snake naturally interpreted that as the best way to teach a kid about heat is to smash their faces onto a stove repeatedly until they were deathly afraid of kitchen appliances.

As for why the snake cared so much about learning "how to human," as she put it? Because she was clearly obsessed with Jake and proving herself useful to him. Miranda was not even sure how to interpret the snake's emotions... love? Infatuation? Neither felt right. Obsession was truly the only word she thought fit.

One good thing about this obsession was that she wanted to do all she could to make Miranda happy and her level of respect for the City Lord was through the roof as she seemed to view Miranda as a "senior" in the Jake fan club.

Her respect for Miranda was good, though... because the snake girl had a lot to learn before Miranda would dare unleash her on the wider society. She had done a lot of questionable things, and Miranda would be far more frightened of the C-grade if she didn't have the demeanor of an unknowing teenager. One area she had really messed up was in her recruitment methods.

At first, Miranda had assumed the snakes had maybe helped or rescued people who had been trying to cross the Grand Mangrove River and found themselves in trouble. Nope, it turned out that the snakes *were* the trouble. They swooped up any humans they came across and forced them back to the center of the mangrove, and had them construct the small settlement that could now be found there.

If this wasn't bad enough, then the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake's method of studying the human body had been to literally study the body. She had initially consumed several women and girls to learn about human physiology, and once she felt more familiar with the form, she forced women to help her refine it. This was partly done by her investigating how the human women's bodies looked and having them explain things... which included cutting them open with a healer on standby.

It was only after this she began to learn a bit about humans were supposed to act she stopped. No one had ever even mentioned to her what she did was wrong by human standards because who the hell would dare tell a C-grade when she was out of line? Who would dare claim her actions were wrong and that what she did would be morally reprehensible by any reasonable moral standard? Well, that person ended up being Miranda. The source of this content is novel-fire-net

Things in the settlement had improved after their arrival, and the mood had relaxed after Miranda had effectively taken charge. She still vividly remembered when a dozen or so humans had seen her tell off the Alabaster snake in public and their looks of utter horror for what was about to happen – because, yes, the snake girl's usual response to dissent was just to kill whoever disagreed.

People were dumbfounded when they saw that the snake girl just nodded enthusiastically and asked what she was then supposed to do. From that point on, they were all incredibly friendly whenever Miranda was around, and the fact that the snakes no longer killed people who messed up was a huge improvement. The young snake still needed to learn that simply attacking people wasn't in any way constructive.

Miranda sighed as she saw that the snake girl was a bit down after being told what she was doing wrong for the umpteenth time that day. It was probably time to “reward” her.

“We can continue this tomorrow, okay?” Miranda said in a soothing tone to the snake. “Also... I have a surprise for you.”

The snake girl just looked up and tilted her head to the side.

“A surprise from the Chosen,” Miranda clarified.

The eyes of the girl instantly lit up as she jumped to her feet. “What! What is it!?”

Miranda smiled at the nervous and excited girl. “A name.”

Jake and Miranda had agreed that this time around, Miranda would help him decide, and she quickly realized that Jake was obsessed with using the physical appearance or attributes of creatures to name them. It made her question that if Jake ever had a kid, he would name him or her Humany or something else dumb like that... alas, at least Miranda was there this time around to shoot down any downright horrible name ideas. Because Jake had a lot of dumb ideas.

After a bit of time, they narrowed the names down to a few. All of them were still real names, and all of them were even acceptable names for a girl. However, all of them also partly included parts of the Alabaster Crimstoneye Snake’s race name or physical attributes. Miranda personally thought that using parts of the race name for the naming scheme was moronic, as when the beast evolved, the race name could entirely change. So calling the snake Alabastie – an actual suggestion by Jake – the name would just come off as incredibly dumb-looking if she ever evolved.

She really hoped he had been joking, though, as Jake could not seriously just take the first word of a creature’s race name and slap on an “ie” or “y,” right? Yeah, that was too much for even him... even if he had kind of done that with Sylphie. And Mystie... yeah, okay, he had been absolutely serious.

Good thing Miranda was there. Anyway, the final battle of names came down to Scarlett, after her red eyes, and Allie. Allie, because of Alabaster and because it still fit Jake’s obsession with names ending in “ie” or “y”. Both of these were at least real names, and both were short and sweet. Even if the snake ended up changing race, later on, the names would not be questionable.

“A name!?” the snake girl gaped. “Me, named by the Chosen? Really?”

She was almost dancing, and Miranda had to admit she looked rather cute. If she hadn’t seen the girl rip the head off a man without flinching, she would even have gone as far as to call her innocent-looking.

“Yes, but he had two suggestions, so you need to choose yourself,” Miranda made clear. Miranda had to admit she was not actually that comfortable just naming another person herself. She wanted them to at least have some choice over the matter. Not that any of the beasts Jake had named complained about their names no matter how bad they were... Miranda just wasn’t comfortable doing it.

“What are they!?” the snake girl said, practically jumping up and down.

“One of them is Scarlett. It comes from the red color of your eyes, and the color red often symbolizes courage, passion, heat, and force. It is a powerful name. Some also think it a violent name, something that is fitting for your rather fiery personality,” Miranda said, the snake girl listening attentively.

“The second name is Allie. Parts of the name stem from your race and that you are an Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake. The name is considered fair and symbolizes harmony and nobility, and was originally the name of a saint. Moreover, it is often a nickname, so if you wish to have a longer, more formal-sounding name, you can also do that and retain being called Allie by friends and family,” Miranda explained. “If you are not satisfied with any of these naming ideas, do not hesitate to voice it, and we can go back to the drawing board.”

“No! No, I love both of them!” the girl instantly said as she waved her hands back and forth.

“Alright,” Miranda said with a smile. “Just think carefully about it. A name is important and isn’t something one should just choose haphazardly.”

Future Scarlett/Allie fell into deep thought as she seemed to think very deeply about what name she wanted. Doing something that Jake should maybe do once in his damn life as he had a tendency to just jump straight into a dumb decision.

Heck, for all she knew, he was probably doing something reckless and stupid at that very moment.

Fooled. Bamboozled. Entrapped. Completely and utterly let behind the light and taken advantage of. That is the fate that befell Jake after he argued with the Cosmic Genesis Worm. He had fallen for the dumbest thing ever: the good old “then prove it” argument.

Prove that he was not afraid of water.

Jake was not afraid, and even if he knew he was being baited into it, he had gone along with Sandy’s taunts. It wouldn’t be that bad to just dive down under the water for a little bit and maybe fight a few D-grades or something, right? He just had to avoid any C-grades. Heck, he could even practice stealth a little and sneak his way down there and find whatever it was he was looking for!

He had so much belief in himself... so how the hell had he ended up in his current situation?

Jake constantly shot arcane blasts behind himself to catapult forward faster as the large shark chased him angrily. He had to continually break through barriers as the water itself tried to stop him and slow him down long enough to be devoured by the monstrous beast. A beast that was naturally a C-grade.

[Razorstream Shark – lvl ???]

As for where the hell Sandy was? Well, Sandy was busy eating an entire fucking coral reef that the shark protected and seemed to use to create some natural formation. Jake had gone there after being told by Sandy it looked like a great spot to find valuable things, and since he wasn't a chicken, he could totally go there and get some herbs, right? There were indeed good herbs there, no way around it, but there was also an angry shark. A shark Jake had made even angrier after he stole some kelp.

Spinning around in the water, Jake took out his bow and charged an Arcane Powershot. The water fought against him as always, but he managed to overpower the natural environment and launch an arrow nevertheless.

It flew forward and hit the side of the twenty-meter-long shark, ripping off a piece of flesh and making it even angrier. Jake rapidly shot again before stepping down with One Step, teleporting to the side just before the maws of the shark snapped shut.

The arrow he had shot had no velocity at all, as Jake had released it with no power. Yet just before the shark shut its mouth around the singular arrow, it suddenly split into ten, with those ten further splitting into ten each for a hundred total.

Its mouth snapped shut just as all the arrows exploded at once, ruffling the large beast a little as Jake even saw the arcane energy flash up through its gills. Once more, he had done more to annoy it than actually damage it.

Charging again, the shark seemed to be getting a bit serious. The water around it warped as several teeth-shaped projectiles were summoned and shot towards him. Jake avoided and shot another arrow, but the waters around the shark moved as a powerful current began revolving around the beast.

Jake's arrows were thrown off-course with the shark charging again. Having no time to release another ranged attack, Jake decided to face it in melee combat. From within his Soulspace, he felt Sim-Jake's attention as his simulacrum observed attentively.

One would think that a shark had few close-combat options besides simply trying to bite its target to death, and one would be correct if it was a normal shark. But this one was an early-tier C-grade with a healthy repertoire of magic.

The sphere of water around the shark began warping as teeth-like objects appeared within it, and Jake's eyes opened wide as he focused. The shark barreled forward, and Jake entered the sphere as he swayed. Several attacks flew by him, but as the current only flowed one way, they all came from the same direction, giving him a chance to dodge. He dodged and used his katars to slightly veer some teeth away from him as soon enough, the shark was upon him.

Rather than try to bite him, it tackled with its snout that now had even more damn teeth growing out of it. Jake met it head-on as he punched forward with his full power. A mix of dark and arcane energy revolved around the katar as Jake used Descending Dark Arcane Fang for the first time in quite a while. The shark had no doubt willingly decided to trade the blow as Jake's hand too was hit by several razor-sharp teeth, but rather than cut through his gloves and puncture his hand, the gloves remained undamaged as Jake had already poured mana into the legendary item to strengthen it.

Their clash sent a wave of pain through Jake's arm as he was shot backward due to the sheer level of size and momentum the charging shark had, with the bones in his arm hurting, a few cracks having formed here and there. Not that the beast came out of it unharmed. It now had a deep wound in its snout that penetrated nearly three meters into its head as he had extended the blade with Descending Dark Arcane Fang. Sadly, he had failed to hit the brain.

He felt the faint approval of sim-Jake, but also some criticism in his failure to hit the brain and how he hadn't properly transferred the impact through the rest of his body to lessen the strain on his arm. Jake took it in as he decided that if he was going to be forced into underwater combat, he should at least make something out of it.

None of them knew how long sim-Jake had left, but to Jake's surprise, he felt like his simulacrum had gotten back more personality recently after he had regressed to be nothing but a nearly mindless machine improving Shadow Vault.

I guess sim-Jake never got to do any underwater combat... better get his take on this afterward. No, not afterward. Right now.

Jake smirked as the annoyed shark charged once more, a pulse of dense water affinity washing over him. A few thin cuts appeared on his body as he felt a concept of sharpness within the water itself, only making him smile more.

What human hadn't dreamt of fighting a shark?

Probably most humans.

The thing is, Jake wasn't most humans. Never had been.

He dove forward as human met shark, the two clashing as the water filled with blood and a happy worm ate an entire coral reef in the background.

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Chapter 541: Angry Shark, Doo Doo Doo Doo Doo

When fighting a larger foe, one had to always make use of that against them. The shark's size made it far stronger in direct clashes, but Jake's smaller size offered him more mobility and allowed him to make his way around the shark and be more maneuverable.

Not that the shark was slow. It did not only use its body but its magic to move in unpredictable ways. Jake had to constantly adapt as the entire body of the beast was its weapon, teeth-like scales protruding from its skin, all angled to cut him simply by brushing against the body of the beast. This meant that Jake had to constantly back away and make sure only his weapons touched his opponent. To make matters worse, then the Razorstream part of the shark's name was not a joke. The currents of water around the shark cut him like it was filled with tiny razorblades, putting a constant strain on his Scales of the Malefic Viper.

The passive barrier from Arcane Awakening also helped – a skill he had been forced to use right off the bat to just put up a fight. Fully activated, too, as his body was flushed with power and every attack dealt a bit more arcane damage, and the passive shield took off a bit of the power from the razor-like water.

Jake clashed with the beast several times as he was slowly forced back, sim-Jake always at the back of his mind. As if Jake had two minds, they both analyzed their opponent on the fly and adapted their strategy. Fangs of the Malefic Viper made sure every stab included a good dose of poison, and his Hunting Momentum was slowly building up, but the Razorstream made it, so he constantly took damage, and he was hit all the time as the moment-by-moment fight had him the back back foot.

Fighting in water was just a lot harder, and even if he could use his wings to maneuver better than a human normally would, it was still far worse than what a creature naturally operating underwater could do. All of his attacks were weakened, too, as he always had to fight against the water to do anything. However, even so, Jake did not feel any true mortal danger because he always had one thing he could do to end the fight right there and then.

Retreating. Jake could easily get away at any point unless the shark wanted to chase him above water, in which case Jake would happily fight it up there. He was convinced the shark could fight above water if it so desired, and he could make the battle far easier by simply flying up a few kilometers, but he wanted this fight. Sim-Jake wanted this fight.

Jake was forced back by a powerful torrent of cutting water as his scales and arcane barrier both clattered from the thousands of small cuts. His armor was slowly getting torn to shreds, but in return, he managed to land a hit here and there.

Cuts from Jake's katars quickly proved ineffective as the natural armor offered by the teeth-like skin proved highly resistant, meaning only stabbing would work. And katars were really good at stabbing things, so it worked out.

A large summoned maw of teeth tried to close around Jake's leg as he barely managed to avoid it and charge towards the shark. It whipped its body around to smash him with its tail and push him away, but Jake had seen that move before. He ducked under the tail and stabilized himself to not get caught up in the resulting wave of pressure from the water. He then rapidly dove forward and stabbed the backside of the shark with Eternal Hunger before it could once more blast him with a wave of water magic.

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Jake tried to summon mana strings to bind or restrain the massive C-grade, but the teeth on its skin moved and tore off whatever he used. Moreover, it began to release these teeth out of its skin like projectiles, each of them far more powerful than the magically summoned teeth in the water.

Both of them quickly seemed to realize that finishing the other off quickly was not an option as the shark dedicated its focus to whittling Jake down as Jake slowly wounded and poisoned the shark. The hemotoxin poison he used made the beast bleed even more than it should and colored the entire area of their fight red with blood. Not that the shark seemed overly bothered even after hundreds of liters had been drained. Its Vitality was above expectations. However, he also noticed one other important thing.

While Jake was not confident fighting underwater, the shark wasn't confident fighting someone Jake's size either. Something that had quickly become clear upon diving beneath the waves was that the scale of most creatures down there exceeded that of the land dwellers. Chances are, the only creatures that were small were weaklings that the shark could simply swat away or eat in a single gulp, making it completely unaccustomed to someone his size.

They both needed to adapt and overcome the holes in their fighting styles, and in this department, there was no competition.

Jake once more dodged a tail-swipe as he landed a small stab on the base of the tail. The beast rolled around to try and cut him like a meatgrinder, but Jake had already teleported back and pulled out his bow. A single Arcane Powershot was rapidly charged, blowing off many of the teeth acting as the shark's armor and leaving a nasty wound. The beast knew it could not allow him to attack uninterrupted and conjured several ranged attacks to stop him.

Shooting off one more arrow, Jake made it split and explode as a cascade of blasts rocked the water and hid Jake from the shark's sight. Jake took this chance to land another Arcane Powershot before the beast could locate him.

With speed surpassing anything prior, the shark was upon him as the sphere of cutting current around it expanded and grew in power. Jake responded in kind as Pride of the Malefic Viper flared to life, and Jake infused arcane energy into his surroundings to faintly stabilize it.

Resource-wise, Jake was nearly on par with a C-grade, at least when it came to mana. He directly engaged in a battle of environmental control with the shark as he met it in melee once more. Jake had a good few exchanges, and it had allowed him to build some Hunting Momentum, but it was not time yet to use it.

The two of them clashed several more times, both taking damage, with Jake being slowly pushed back by the larger foe. While he was building up for something, he knew the shark was too. However, as things were, he would gladly take advantage of learning some of his foe's patterns.

An attack he had seen many times before was used. It was one where the shark tried to smash him with the side of its body to then follow up with a quick spin and a tail-swipe, with the spin actually just a feint. Jake allowed himself to be hit, even if he could have easily avoided it, and used the momentum from the blow to get shot a bit deeper into the water.

Already having committed to the move, the shark was not fast enough to react as Jake used One Step Mile and appeared right beneath its belly. With one hand, he stabbed Eternal Hunger into its body, and with the other, he stabbed once to break the teeth armor. In a fluid motion, Jake dismissed the katar on that hand and punched forward again, penetrating the wound he had just made with his hand.

He felt the muscles of the shark close around it, and his arm got stuck. Jake gritted his teeth as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, and toxic energy was pumped directly into the guts of the beast. At the same time, Jake took control of the hemotoxin energy within it and forced it towards its heart. He had already thoroughly scanned and understood its physiology and where to hit. All of this was simply a setup for the final blow.

Realizing that Jake was doing far more damage than expected, the shark reacted violently. It began spinning around in the water, with the current sphere flowing in the opposite direction of the spin. The teeth on its skin also began shooting out toward Jake, and the shark shook his body in violent ways.

Jake held on as long as he could. However, the arm inside the shark's body was fully stuck, the shark still not wanting to let him go. The teeth on its skin began growing towards the arm and dug into it. But it didn't stop there as the teeth began growing into the arm itself, and, more frighteningly, Jake felt an odd sensation in his body.

Like his very blood was being manipulated. Blood began pouring out his nose and eyes as Jake made an executive decision. Without any hesitation, he used Eternal Hunger to

cut off the still-stuck hand that had been embedded into the shark just below the elbow. The blood manipulation stopped instantly as Jake kicked off the massive body of the shark, swimming away from it.

As he flew back, Jake used his necklace to deposit a healing potion into his mouth, which he naturally consumed instantly. Dense vital energy entered his body as Jake felt it flow through his bloodstream and into the severed arm as it worked to reconstruct it.

Jake momentarily stopped up. *Blood and healing... fuck, not now.*

The shark came for him again, trying to press its advantage. Jake's plan was slightly thrown off course, but he could correct it. Retreating, Jake bought time for his arm to regrow as he attempted to not get pinned down and eaten. Unable to properly use his bow, Jake switched to mainly using arcane magic and Eternal Hunger. One had to add that the healing from Eternal Hunger was one of those things he usually didn't notice due to its passive nature, but it was not something to underestimate. Granted, Jake was underutilizing the mythical weapon and was far from able to properly make use of it, but just the lifesteal effect brought his longevity in combat to another level.

He ended up tanking many hits as he protected his left side, where an arm and hand were slowly growing out. Jake spent mana like it was no object trying to keep the shark at bay, shooting off endless barrages of stable arcane bolts. The explosive ones did nothing, but he had found that hyper-sharp stable bolts penetrated the teeth hide and caused damage.

One Step was also used liberally to take him away and constantly create distance too. In the end, it was impossible to avoid taking any damage as his body was littered with wounds after only a few minutes. But it was good enough.

The shark, drunk on momentum, did not show any caution as it charged. Jake, having regenerated his arm and hand, pulled out his bow. Surprise flashed in the eyes of the C-grade as Jake grinned and charged Arcane Powershot. Having already committed, the shark did not slow down but instead sped up as it opened its maw. A dense barrier of water was made as the entire sphere shifted and gathered in front of the shark. It churned and spun, aiming to cut everything apart, including any arrows Jake would shoot at it.

Jake focused to the extreme as Steady Aim activated at its fullest. The Arcane Powershot was charged to near-full power as he released an explosive arcane arrow. The super-charged arrow hit the barrier and exploded as Jake had already pulled out a second, far larger arrow.

This one looked nearly like a drill. It was entirely white and far longer than the one he shot before, with several odd markings on its body. It was an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, and with the barrier gone, he shot it fast without even using Arcane Powershot.

The shark was ready and prepared to dodge. Jake had been waiting for this moment as he, through the arcane energy filling the water, laid his eyes upon the large shark and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter for the first time in the fight. The C-grade froze, unable to dodge the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter... but this attack was not the true finisher.

Jake charged forward after the arrow, pushing both of his wings to the extreme to build up speed. The shark was not ready at all when the arrow entered the shark's mouth. It was even less prepared when a charging human was about to do the same. Just as Jake was at the mouth of the beast, he took out both katars and activated all his Hunting Momentum built up so far.

His entire body filled with the concept as he shot forward even faster into the mouth of the C-grade shark. The arrow had done plenty of damage, and Jake bee-lined for his target: the heart. Just as he was in the body of the shark, Gaze wore off. The beast had only been stunned for a second, but in that second, the battle had entirely changed. The momentum had switched.

Upon entering the shark's mouth, it became clear why it was keen on eating things. Jake had entered a maelstrom of teeth and incredibly fast currents as his entire body began getting cut apart. With full power, Jake used the bone katar to punch forward and released a Descend Dark Arcane Fang to cut through the inner walls of flesh to make his way to the heart.

The Hunting Momentum was all spent, but it allowed him to reach his target. Jake finally saw the heart and stabbed Eternal Hunger into it. The bone dagger disappeared from his other hand as Jake used Touch of the Malefic Viper with it to control and redirect all the hemotoxin poison in the C-grade's body to the heart.

What hemotoxins did pre-system was primarily to thin the blood. Post-system, it had a similar effect but on vital energy. Blood was a vessel for vital energy and remained thinned, but the vital energy itself was also far thinner and flowed more easily out of the body, along with its decreased efficiency. So what happened when Jake plunged what was effectively a metal straw into his opponent's container of highly-thinned vital energy?

He finally gave Eternal Hunger a good meal.

Razor-sharp teeth still flew all around Jake as he was cut up, but each wound healed as fast as it came as Jake stood his ground. The vital energies of the shark streamed into Jake through Eternal Hunger as the shark thrashed and tried to kill him. Intense pressure, long teeth trying to kill him, and even the flesh walls themselves closed in on him, but the shark was fighting a losing battle. Eternal Hunger greedily enjoyed its feast as slowly the shark's struggles stopped.

Jake felt the stream of vital energy stop as everything went silent. The teeth around him began floating harmlessly as the body of the shark began withering and wrinkling from the inside.

****You have slain [Razorstream Shark – lvl 202] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 194 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 191 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

With ease, Jake cut his way out the top of the shark. With the beast dead, its body was weak and unable to resist even a casual slash. Jake looked at the shark and scanned it for any treasures and found... nothing. No, wait, on closer inspection, he found an uncommon rarity tooth.

He had felt it from the aura of the beast, but this hammered it home... Razorstream Sharks were low-tier beasts. They were firmly on the weaker end of C-grades. Jake just sucked at fighting underwater. This had been the toughest fight since the Phantomshade Panther... and it was an opponent he would have trashed if they had fought in the air.

"Are you finally done?" Sandy asked him as the worm happily swam over. Well, the worm did not really swim but seemed to still partly be swimming through space. Was a bit slower, though.

"Yes, I am done..." Jake said with exasperation.

"Would it make you happy if I said I was proud of you for killing the fish?"

"No, not really," Jake said curtly.

"Good, because I am not... you move so weirdly down here. You really gotta work on that at some point," Sandy lectured him.

"Just eat me already; let's get out of here. And no more underwater adventures," Jake shook his head.

"Fine, I don't really like the stuff down here anyway. Too watery for my taste," the worm agreed, making Jake want to smack the worm for convincing him to go down there to begin with.

Sandy ate him up, and once Jake was inside, he deactivated Arcane Awakening and let the weakness flood him. Okay, even if he complained, the fight had actually been good

practice, and it had allowed him to test one of the many techniques he had theorized. The entire Touch-controlled hemotoxin into big slurp by Eternal Hunger was not made up on the spot but something he had considered for a while.

He had also gotten a flash of inspiration related to Blood of the Malefic Viper. All in all, it had been a worthwhile fight, but he still wanted to avoid doing that shit again. At least until he had a better way to fight down there.

Jake took a deep breath and got on with things as he felt a certain someone waiting for him in his Soulspace. Not wanting to make himself wait – because Jake knew he could be a bit impatient – Jake used Serene Soul Meditation to enter his Soulspace to talk to his other self.

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Chapter 542: A Bloody Mystery

"The fighting style itself cannot reasonably include a method to nullify negative environmental effects... we will need something else for that. There was potential in Pride of the Malefic Viper, but we need a proper method to not find ourselves in a similar situation," sim-Jake said.

"Easier said than done, considering these kinds of enemies rely on their environments and will actively try and break down any defenses you have made against them. I could likely have made an arcane barrier isolating myself from the water pressure, but the shark would instantly try to destroy it for its magic to work," Jake argued.

"I never said it was easy, just that it needs to be done. Maybe figure out how others do it. Though I will admit that it is a major hurdle. Moving in water is simply not optimal with the human body, and it eliminates all footwork and weakens every attack," sim-Jake mulled over the issue. "I can see using the destructive arcane energy as a way to partly eliminate the pressure at all times, especially when striking, but that also creates problems."

"Sustainability," Jake nodded.

"Exactly."

The mana cost from infusing every movement with mana would be too much for him to bear, and they both knew it.

“A solution will have to be found at some point,” sim-Jake concluded.

“Naturally,” Jake agreed before asking something that had been on his mind. “What happened, by the way? Not to be rude, but you were on your way out the last time we met. Now, you are more you once more. What changed?”

“Honestly,” sim-Jake said. “You should know it. I am you, and you are me, and not existing is one of the thoughts that we fear on a very base level. When I did feel myself begin to fade away and become nothing, something triggered in me. A sense of survival, even though I know that reemerging with you is still me surviving. I guess you can just say that I don’t wanna die. After meeting Sandy and seeing Earth transformed and not just that boring mansion in the Order and the occasional mind-numbing alchemy lesson, I realized that I still want to enjoy at least a few more adventures.”

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Jake had indeed kind of known this was the case but wanted to ask anyway as he wasn’t entirely sure what his other self was thinking. “But this doesn’t mean the merging stopped.”

“No, that it does not. But let us just say that I will immortalize myself one way or another. You won’t be rid of me that easily. Luckily too, because there is more to improve in our fighting style than I originally estimated, and two heads are better than one,” sim-Jake said. “Ah, and don’t worry, our new Vault skill will come, even if I know that the Records of that skill keeps me alive right now. Keeps me, me.”

“Just don’t begin to get any fancy ideas about taking over the body and replacing me,” Jake smirked.

“We both know that won’t happen. I can’t. Your Records trump mine so many times over it isn’t even funny. Being best buds with Villy is just cheating,” sim-Jake snickered in return. “Now go back to Sandy’s stomach and get to work. I have business to attend to.”

Jake shrugged and complied as he exited his Soulspace, leaving sim-Jake behind.

Sim-Jake did not immediately begin practicing but went towards the chimera of pure curse energy. It looked satisfied after having a feast and didn’t even react as sim-Jake laid a hand on it. Closing his eyes, energy moved between them for a few minutes before he nodded and returned to improving the Vault skill.

Jake, in the outside world, had not seen any of this happen but was busy getting back the glove he had lost in the body of the shark. Rather than needing to retrieve the physical object, Jake could use the remaining glove to regrow the other one on his formerly severed hand. It would have been cheaper to just retrieve the glove, but he had honestly forgotten about it as the item had turned inert after he cut off the hand. Sandy had already shot above the water and was flying through the sky, so turning back was not an option either.

Watching it reform on his hand over the next hour was relatively interesting. It was all system-fuckery to the extreme, but he was not complaining. Once the glove was back in his hand – and put on his hand - Jake turned his attention to something perhaps even more important.

During the fight with the shark, he had a eureka moment. More accurately, as he felt his blood flow and carry the vital energies, he questioned something.

Blood was a damn great vessel for energy. It was what made Blood of the Malefic Viper such a potent skill and why there were many creatures you could slay, and their blood turned into valuable items. Vampires consumed blood due to its richness and purity of vital energy too. All in all, blood was essentially a naturally-occurring treasure-tier liquid found within most biological lifeforms.

Its usual effect was carrying vital energy through the body more efficiently. Heck, this was why regenerating dozens of holes in the body was easier than healing a severed hand, even if the pure mass of flesh one had to heal was larger. Regenerating the hand relied mostly on transporting energy through the Soulshape, while holes in the body could be supplied with blood in the nearby area to heal faster. Healing potions also instantly attached themselves to the blood of the body and used that to find where it was most efficiently used. Because the body naturally knew where the vital energy was needed.

Blood was clearly tied to vital energy, and vital energy comes from Vitality. Blood of the Malefic Viper even gave Vitality, and it was a fact that someone with more Vitality could produce more blood than someone that had a lower stat. All of those things were true, and yet Blood of the Malefic Viper had nada to do with vital energy at all.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron. It has been further improved, even carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One within. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy and as a deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on Vitality and Wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats. Passively provides 1 Vitality per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your blood be forever the bane of all that wishes you harm.

The more Jake thought about it, the less it made sense. The skill gave him Vitality, but nothing about the skill seemed to truly indicate it had anything to do with the stat. For all other skills, he saw it make far more sense, but not with this one. Heck, the toxicity of the infused blood scaled with Vitality *and* Wisdom. They were equal when it came to scaling, but with all other skills, the stat it offered was also the one that empowered the skill the most.

Jake reflected a bit on the skill. He had first gotten it at epic rarity and then upgraded to Ancient after the Trial of Myriad Toxins by absorbing the drop of blood from Villy. That had been the catalyst, and what was that drop of blood?

It was a fragment of Records. It was knowledge given physical form, which could also be seen with how it was tied to Sagacity. So the upgrade path Jake had gone back then was by making the blood better when used and giving it far more scope. The part about carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One was a buff when it came to alchemy too. All of this made Jake think he had missed something obvious.

He began experimenting right away as he tried out his theory. Jake could not truly control the blood he infused, and he had always used it as an external tool, either as an ingredient or a weapon. However, blood was meant to be inside the body the last time he checked, so would there not be an application there?

Focusing, he infused the blood inside his body as usual. This time, he tried to control it – something usually not needed as the blood adapted according to his will *after* being added to a mixture. It was more difficult than Jake expected, and he ended up having to apply some methods from his usual alchemy as he effectively turned his body into a cauldron and the blood in his body into the batch. But rather than a poison, Jake wanted to make a health potion.

The result? Him spending the better part of an hour only experiencing failure. The worst part was that Jake knew what he was missing; he just couldn't fix it. He needed to properly infuse more active vital energy into the blood, but he couldn't control the process, at least not satisfactorily. As he wondered what to do, Jake got a brilliant idea.

Taking out Eternal Hunger, Jake proceeded to cut off his hand once more and consumed a health potion. Vital energy flooded his body and, as usual, bound itself to his blood. Jake then began the process again, but rather than trying to infuse vital energy from scratch, Jake used the energy from the healing potion as a base and guide. He poisoned the healing potion liquid and tried to make it better. It went okay as he focused on healing the severed hand for the second time that day.

Once it was healed, Jake kept experimenting until the potion cooldown was ready, and he cut it off again. This continued for nearly an entire day as he slowly began to form a coherent idea and became more familiar with his blood and vital energy both.

He was still not quite certain what the purpose of what he was trying to achieve was besides making more active vital energy to make his blood better when it came to healing. Jake did feel like he made some progress, but he needed the healing potion every time to properly do it. The highly-active energy in healing potions was the apex of vital energy due to the amount of system assistance it got, and Jake knew he could not actually replicate it, but he wanted to at least make some progress...

Or just make his usage of the healing potion better.

Another day passed, and Sandy didn't ask him to come out a single time, even if the worm did find some stuff to steal here and there. It was understood that Jake did not want any more water combat, and Sandy, quite frankly, also didn't seem to enjoy being underwater that much either.

This day was spent with Jake cutting off his arm a good forty or so times total, sometimes choosing not to use a healing potion as he healed it. He also tried inflicting injuries on himself in other places. He even took some of the venom from that Emperor Urchin that the whale had given him and consumed it. It was potent enough to deal noticeable damage, even if it was primarily of a neurotoxic nature. He needed it for Palate either way, so why not?

He began to feel like he was touching upon an idea, but he was still missing something. Jake was certain that with another week or so, he would have it down... but he wasn't that patient when he had other options.

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Jake did not know if the charges would carry over to C-grade or if the skill changed, so he should use them all now, right? Also... he kind of liked learning about Villy. It was a bit like stalking your friends on social media for embarrassing photos from their teenage years, and Jake was all for it to get some ammunition to make fun of the god with.

With that in mind, Jake activated the skill as he experienced another vision.

"I am once more incredibly impressed with your continued progress," the old man said as he smiled proudly. "To do all this without any dedicated alchemy skill..."

"Saying it is entirely without a skill isn't correct, Master," the Viper in his human form said. "While it is true they are not dedicated alchemy skills, there are stark similarities."

"True. However, you specialize in poison as per your heritage. This is the exact opposite of that," the old man shook his head. "And yet it isn't. As unsightly as it is, an old man like me does find it enviable to have such heavenly gifts. A body that is an alchemical ingredient in itself."

Jake was confused as he observed the scene playing out in front of him. He saw the Viper sitting with a cauldron inside of a large stone chamber, with the old man scrutinizing his work. Moreover, the Viper said a word Jake could have never imagined the Viper would say... he had called the old man Master. He also felt like the Viper was pretty young in this vision, but he wasn't sure if it was the youngest he had seen him. It had to be close.

"And I wish I had Master's knowledge of alchemy," the Viper smiled.

“Heh,” the old man chuckled. “I have no doubt you will surpass this old man in due time. You will learn all I have to teach with the time I have left.”

A sense of sadness came over the room as the Viper frowned.

“There is no reason to be sad,” the old man soothed the Viper. “Time will claim all, but we enlightened races have our own Path to immortality. As long as our knowledge remains, so shall we remain. The Records of the multiverse are forever. Any who dies; any who has lived and will ever live is eternal.”

“Easy for you to call knowledge eternal... why not pursue actual immortality?” Villy scoffed.

“Because knowledge can be both a curse and a gift, and your old Master had decided his Path,” the old man shook his head at the would-be Primordial. “Now stop dallying and explain to me the process of what you are attempting to do.”

“Fine,” the Viper said as he looked down at what he had just brewed. “So, the thought process behind this attempt was to...”

Jake listened but began to zone out even if he knew he should be listening. He couldn't stop himself as he stared more at the old man and faintly noticed something. Something that was barely detectable, perhaps due to the nature of the vision... the old man had a Bloodline. That in itself was noteworthy, but what stood out more was that it felt familiar. He had seen it before, which made no sense. Because the one who Jake remembered having the Bloodline was also present in the room.

This old man had the same Bloodline as the Malefic Viper.

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Chapter 543: What Even is a Health Potion?

Jake was absolutely certain of one thing: two identical Bloodlines could not exist. Even if someone with a Bloodline had a child, the child would have their own Bloodline with its own unique signature. One would be able to feel the difference between two family members even if the effects of their Bloodlines were identical.

But the old man had the *exact* same Bloodline as Villy. Jake was completely zoned out of the vision where the two discussed as he tried to figure out how the hell this was possible. It was impossible for the Viper to somehow be the kid of this old man, and one

could not give their Bloodlines to others as the Bloodline resided in the Truesoul. Only the system could give a Bloodline, the Viper had said to himself. So Jake saw only one explanation.

The Viper had gained this old man's Bloodline sometime after he had died. Assuming the Viper had been truthful when he said he got his Bloodline after reaching godhood, then it had to be a lot of time afterward. However, this also raised some questions. Had the Viper requested this Bloodline? If he had, then it had to be a powerful Bloodline, and if it was a powerful Bloodline, then why was the old man stuck at peak C-grade and talking about his time soon being up? Maybe it was just Jake being biased, but he assumed anyone with a truly powerful Bloodline should at least be able to break through to B-grade.

I will definitely have an interesting talk with Villy after this, Jake confirmed to himself as he began to actually focus on the vision at hand.

It was just the Viper explaining what he was doing, and what he was doing was trying to make a healing poison using his blood. The Viper talked about how it was hard to fully isolate the vital energies in the blood both before he put it in the cauldron and when it was in there.

Jake listened in attentively and quickly got the gist of it as he had been struggling with the same thing during the last few days. His issue was that the Blood of the Malefic Viper infused blood was so tied to him it was difficult to make it more untied. This was not a problem with poison usually, as it was just a catalyst and got infused into all the other materials, but in this case, he wanted it to be a primary ingredient.

As for why he wanted it? He wanted to make a "better" health potion that acted faster and maybe didn't even trigger the potion cooldown. One that could help him heal a wound incredibly fast and resonate with his Blood of the Malefic Viper. He also just wanted to see if he could upgrade Blood to allow him to heal faster in general.

The health potion was more a representation of what he wanted and a way to practice isolating and controlling the vital energy in his blood, not the primary objective. The Viper said the same as he explained how he wanted to better control his vital energies and blood in general.

"Heh," the old man chuckled. "I find it interesting how you try to create a health potion when that is not truly what you want to make. Controlling your blood better is only one piece of the puzzle, and you will never be able to infuse enough vital energies into the blood to heal fast enough for what you want. If you want that, you need to heal yourself in the ethereal realm – heal your Soulshape – and not your physical body. But we both know the inefficiency in that... so what you truly want is a way for your body to do what you want it to and for more vital energy to work at once. A healing potion does supercharge you with vital energy, true, but what is the biggest obstacle when trying to infuse your blood to heal you faster?"

“Time,” the Viper instantly said. “But a health potion fixes that; I just need it to-“

“Why does it need to be a health potion, and why do you need to infuse your blood every time?” the old man asked pointedly.

“I am not sure I get it,” the Viper said. “I need a health potion for it to heal... I have tried making toxins that heal me, but it never works. And I need to infuse my blood every time for the vital energy to be properly carried in it.”

“Is that because your blood is bad at carrying energy?”

“Well, it is good at carrying energy, but only toxic energies... but... I think I understand what you are getting at. You want me to attune my blood to better carry vital energy, but won't that just be a step backward after I improved it to better carry mana?”

“Vital energy, mana, stamina, why do we have to put a label on everything? Why do we need to define what a poison and a healing potion are anyway? The system shall handle all the definitions we need; we just need to force our own understanding. Who is to say a poison cannot be a healing potion and a healing potion cannot be a poison? Ask yourself, *who* is it meant to heal? If it only needs to heal one person, why does it matter if it is poison or not? As long as it to you is a healing potion, the system shall respect your will,” the old man smiled.

He opened his palm as an orb of energy appeared. Jake felt the intense vital energy from it as it suddenly changed into mana, and then into stamina, and back into vital energy again. With a swipe of his hand, the vital energy suddenly spread out throughout the room and hit the walls, making cracks appear all over them. Another pulse of pure stamina was released that somehow repaired the walls. No, had it not been mana there right at the end? Jake wasn't sure...

“Energy is energy; as long as you have one, you have them all. You think too much about making your blood work with one or the other when you need it to work with all of them. Your body is your temple, and you decide the design. Your blood is a part of your body, just like any other element. If you can control how your hand moves, how fast your heart beats, and know how to smile like you are right now... so can you dictate what your blood is,” the old man said. “Within reason, of course.”

Jake barely considered the words as he was still stuck on what the actual fuck the old man had done before when he demonstrated the energies. The level of energy control he deployed was... not normal as in, absolutely bonkers. Jake had no idea how the hell he had done what he did. Jake could also change mana into vital energy and vice-versa, but that was a long and arduous process when crafting. Not what the old man had just done where he morphed the energies effortlessly in seconds. No, less than seconds.

The Viper also stared at the old man as his eyes shone with enlightenment. Jake then felt himself truly merge with the Viper and instantly noticed some differences. Jake's blood was not toxic by default but infused with heavy doses of vital energy, while the Viper's blood primarily had poison in it. He naturally healed from vitality-based poisons in his body, whereas Jake healed from regular vital energy.

It was nearly the opposite of Jake, as Jake had to put effort into making his blood toxic, and Villy had to put effort into making it non-toxic. But what the Viper did now was more or less to prime the blood. Make it far more malleable to other energies, using the system's assistance to make it all possible. This instantly made the level of toxicity in his blood rise, and Jake did not hesitate to join in as he mimicked the Viper – but with the opposite result.

His blood became more filled with vital energy as he repeated the process of what the Viper did. Yet he also felt like all poison made from it would be more potent. What Jake did when he infused Blood of the Malefic Viper with mana and turned it toxic was just to use the mana as a catalyst to change the vital energy. It was all process that was now being refined and improved.

One could almost say the blood became thicker. Better at carrying energy than before. It did come with the cost of each drop of blood being more valuable, and hence Jake or the Viper losing more health points upon wounded and bleeding... but the tradeoff was worth it, and it wasn't a one-to-one increase either. Because Jake also felt that each health point now counted ever-so-slightly more.

Moreover, the total capacity of the blood changed as it was ready to receive energy at any point.

The old man came with a few comments here and there as Jake and the Viper both meditated. About half an hour passed before the Viper opened his eyes, smiling from success. Jake was still not there and was about to curse as time rewound till just about when the Viper began meditating, skipping the first conversation.

This time around, Jake got it, and as he willed it, the time rewound the third time to show the entire starting talk. The Viper and old man chatted as Jake just listened in, still feeling the changes in his body. A bit later, the vision ended, and Jake returned to the real world with an upgraded skill and a lot of questions.

Jake appeared within Sandy's stomach with the worm not even asking where he had gone this time. Without further ado, he checked out the upgrade.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient --> Legendary)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons and the lifeblood of an immortal being. Allows the Alchemist to infuse their blood with energy to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron and even carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One within. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy or as a

deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. Allows your blood to carry more energy than usual, including vital energy, passively speeding up regeneration. This effect is further amplified when consuming a health potion or other sources of beneficial vital energy. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on Vitality and Wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats. Increase in natural regeneration based on total health pool. Passively provides 3 Vitality per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your blood be forever the bane of all that wishes you harm and that which brings you eternal life.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 189 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 190 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 192 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

It was as expected for the most part. The two levels were a nice surprise, as Jake had only expected a single one. For the skill itself, a bit of the wording had changed here and there, but the big takeaways were that it specified the blood now carried more energy than before, and that effect was further amplified when using a healing potion. But, it still specified that what Jake did when he infused his blood was to turn it poisonous. He could not simply infuse it with more vital energy if he wanted to when he used the skill.

To add on, due to his blood now passively carrying more vital energy, it increased his natural regeneration. He could feel it wasn't by much, but it was there. The big thing was that this effect was amplified after using a healing potion, and the entire increase in regeneration was based on his total health pool.

Finally, there was also an increase in Vitality for each level. Considering Jake was towards the end of D-grade, the instant influx of stats was huge, especially considering Vitality was the stat in which he had the second-best percentage amplifier due to the Bloodline Patriarch title and Blessing of the Malefic Viper both including it.

With a bit of excitement, Jake cut off the hand for the hundredth or so time over the last few days. Instantly he felt his vital energy move as it began naturally regenerating. It healed faster than before, no doubt about it, but it wasn't like it just suddenly popped out. He would estimate about twenty-five percent faster, with the vital energy consumption about ten percent higher, to achieve the same effect. Health Point-wise, he lost about the same.

After he fully healed the hand, he repeated chopping it off again and then drank a potion. This time around, the change was noticeable. Before the upgrade, it took Jake a few minutes to heal a hand, but now?

He watched intently as what appeared like blood vessels grew into thin air. Soon they transformed into bones, flesh grew on the bones, and his hand reformed. The entire process took only thirty to forty seconds, and Jake nodded, knowing this was not the best it could be.

Taking out his cauldron, he got to work. The vision had not been solely about transforming his blood but also about how to use it. To make full use of it. One of the objectives had been to make a healing potion, after all.

When Jake usually made a healing potion, he didn't use any Blood of the Malefic Viper. His blood was inherently a poison, there was no way around it, and even this upgrade did not change that. Jake made healing potions according to the methods he had read in books and followed the recipes to the T as, well, it worked. He had never even considered using his blood over purified water when making a health potion. Not that Jake hadn't tried to make beneficial things with his blood, as he had done just as the Viper and tried to make a vitality-based poison that could help heal him. One that could even circumvent the potion cooldown.

Jake now realized that the entire thought process was flawed. Health potions worked because they were health potions, not because of all the ingredients put into them. When Jake tried to make these poisons of vital energy, he – and the Viper from the sounds of it – had missed the most essential ingredient of a health potion: a truckload of system-fuckery.

Without further ado, Jake began the crafting process of a health potion. The only true change was that Jake poured in his blood as the base rather than water. He knew that he first had to prime the blood and make it focused on vital energy, which was indeed what he started out by doing. Once the liquid was ready, Jake just did as he usually did when making a health potion, following the recipe to the letter.

And as usual, the process was straightforward. Perhaps a bit more challenging than usual, but it was not much, and after only failing two brews, Jake succeeded.

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

Jake looked at the batch and bottled up some of the liquid. It was red, just like a normal health potion, but he did get a slight reaction from Sense of the Malefic Viper when looking at it, making it clear this was poisonous.. Using Identify on the potion, he was surprised, though.

[Malefic Health Potion (Common)] - Restores 22310 health when consumed. Will cause damage to anyone besides the creator if consumed.

Jake stared at it for a while. Everything was pretty much as expected, and what Jake had made was poison to any who was not him. The rarity was common as expected too. Jake knew that rarity was based solely on the amount of resources a potion restored, and after entering the academy, he had learned that the minimum for uncommon rarity potions was a hundred thousand resources restored. Yet the number still stood out.

This was the first health potion Jake had ever made that restored over twenty thousand health, and it had instantly jumped to twenty-two thousand. It was about a twenty-five percent increase from his usual max... about the same as what his natural regeneration had increased with.

After putting all the liquid in bottles, Jake – once again – cut off his hand. With great expectations, he chugged the new health potion. It did not disappoint.

Instantly blood vessels sprung out into thin air, and a red hand shape was formed where it was supposed to be as flesh grew on the bones within seconds. The red shape was filled out, and skin grew over it all. Finally, with a simple mental command, Jake equipped the glove. The source of this content is *novel✕fire✕net*

Seven seconds.

From drinking the potion to fully regenerating a hand, it had taken him seven seconds. Jake grinned from ear to ear to himself at the result as one of his biggest weaknesses – amputation - had been significantly addressed. He was more than happy with the upgrade and also felt that the blood was just overall more potent now in every way, which would empower all poisons he made by a little. All in all, great stuff.

With all of that done, Jake moved on to the final thing. His talk with Villy.

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

Chapter 544: The First Sage

He reached out and instantly felt the connection form. *“Hey Villy, I-“*

“Jake, just know that Duskleaf and I are both here for you in your time of need. You do not need to resort to self-harm like that, okay? We are willing to talk, so you can stop

cutting your hand off. It has suffered enough... no, you have suffered enough," Villy's voice descended with the fakest tone of concern Jake had ever heard.

"Ha, ha, very funny," Jake responded to the quip from the Viper. Just because Jake had cut off his hand a hundred times or so over the last few days didn't mean he was into self-harm.

Well, except if it was productive self-harm, in which case he was all for it.

"Heh, so, got a good upgrade this time around? From a cursory glance, it seems like you finally managed to upgrade Blood. I had quite honestly expected that to be one of the first ones considering you stole a drop from me," the Viper said.

"Yep, I got it, as well as a vision..." Jake.

"Spill it. What kind of embarrassing moment did it show you now? Oh, I know. Is it this time I filled an entire lake with my blood and turned it into a "healing potion" to help the local wildlife, only to poison them all and end up killing off an entire army, to then just get pushed out of the area by a giant weasel that was immune to my toxins?" the Viper asked.

"No, but I am sure there is an interesting story there. This vision was quite a bit more relaxed but far more intriguing. First of all... I didn't know you once had someone you called Master?" Jake asked a bit teasingly. *"You seemed to respect him a lot too. Truly a loyal disciple."*

A few seconds passed. *"I have had several people whom I would call Master throughout my life. But based on me actually showing genuine respect, only one comes to mind. The original owner of my Bloodline."*

"That is the one," Jake said. *"So, what is the story there? I have so many questions."*

"You know, Jake... you are the first one besides my wife to ever know about him. Not even the other Primordials are aware he existed," Villy said in a very out-of-character serious, and melancholic tone.

"I never even learned his name, only knowing his title. He was simply known as the First Sage. For reference, the country he belonged to had sages as their elders of sorts, and he was naturally the highest-ranked one. He, too, was alive when the system arrived and was already an accomplished, if troubled, man. I took quite a bit longer to progress through the grades than many others and, quite honestly, fell behind. The area of the planet I was from was considered weak and desolate, so by the time I reached C-grade, the world was already full of them. However, on my planet at the time, there was no doubt who the most powerful person was. He was a man who I believed I could fool, and I wanted to take advantage of him to teach me alchemy. The old man saw through

my disguise like nothing and instantly knew I was the feared Wyvern of the Desolates. But what did he do? He invited me in for tea.”

Villy spoke with far more emotion than Jake was used to, making him just shut up.

“He was intrigued by my skills and wanted to learn more about me. Tell me, Jake, from what you saw did he strike you as a talented alchemist?” Villy asked.

“For sure,” Jake said. The old man had been insanely talented and was no doubt-

“He wasn’t one. In fact, he never truly chose to specialize anywhere but always ended up pursuing new things. On top of that, he was not a fighter, not because he couldn’t fight, but because he chose not to. I understood why. There was not a single entity on our planet that stood a sliver of a chance against him.”

“I don’t understand... if he was this strong and talented, along with having a Bloodline, why didn’t he evolve into B-grade? Or did he end up evolving?” Jake asked.

“No, he died still in peak C-grade,” Villy answered, exasperation clear in his voice. *“To this day, it still troubles me. I actually think meeting him was one of the reasons I even managed to become a god. Jake, you are talented, but this man... was something more. Your talents are bizarre but specialized, while he was a universal genius. A jack of all trades, master of all. With no effort, any skill he had would reach legendary rarity and beyond. It was like he didn’t truly exist within the world like the rest of us. As if he stood above it and observed. By the time I was in peak C-grade, I knew I still would not have stood a chance against him. Not that I would have after just evolving to B-grade either... he was a monster. Far more than I.”*

“I am just getting more and more confused here,” Jake said. *“Why not evolve then? What stopped him?”*

“Nothing except his own will. He... chose not to evolve. As I said, to this day, it still troubles and frustrates me. He could have evolved, and truthfully, I do not doubt he would have become a god. But he had no desire to be one. He had barely any desire at all. Like such desires were beneath him, or perhaps just not something he cared about,” the Viper explained. *“I partly understood why, for he was also pained. Tortured. He did not wish to keep living, and to him, perhaps immortality would have been a curse.”*

Jake’s frown only deepened, but he didn’t interrupt without getting asked.

“The First Sage taught me only for about a decade. During this time, I never left his side and took in everything like a sponge. My alchemy reached levels I had never even imagined, but more than that, he helped refine my mindset. If you haven’t noticed, I like to find ways to take advantage of the system. This man was the one who originally instilled those thoughts into me. He was also the first one to teach me what a

Transcendent was. He was a premier scholar in all things system and what he discovered back then is now common knowledge throughout the multiverse. The knowledge that man had was out of this world... and before you ask, then yes, he was a Transcendent. Not just one either... I learned of four Transcendent skills he possessed, but he might have had more I never knew about. Wanna hear the funniest thing? One of them was made with the express purpose of shortening his lifespan.

"If you think that one of the reasons for his blight was his Bloodline, then you would be entirely correct. I have told you it is not one that offers combat power, and that is entirely correct. In fact, many would call its effects rather mundane if not useless. I have never told you what it does, and I guess it is about time I tell you, considering how much I know about yours."

Jake would be lying if he said he wasn't curious. Especially after hearing so much about the original owner.

"Its name is short and sweet. Bloodline of the Immortal Mind. It gives no stats, no boosts to anything... besides one thing. It gives perfect memory," Villy explained, leaving a pause for Jake to ask.

"But don't you get that already with high enough stats?" Jake asked predictably. The source of this content is *novel**fire**net*

"You do, which is why many find the Bloodline useless and unnecessary. I will also admit that I was critical of it, as the First Sage explained, but I have come to believe it was a big contributor to his power. Allow me to explain. As I said, like me, he existed before the system arrived, and yet he had a Bloodline that allowed perfect memory, which makes me question if perhaps this allowed him to know and remember things the system never intended for anyone to be aware of."

"Is that why you wanted it? Wait, how did you even get it?" Jake asked, confused.

"As I said, I got it from a system event after becoming a god. It was a bit like your Tutorial, and in the end, you could request a reward. I asked for the Bloodline of the First Sage, and to my surprise, the system gave it. Not cheaply, but cheaper than expected. Once more, I felt like the old man had expected this to someday happen," Villy explained.

"I see," Jake simply answered. *"Why did you leave your first master? I cannot believe you learned everything from him in only a few years."*

"I did not," Villy said, hesitant to continue.

"Then why?"

"I told you my first Master was peculiar, and it was only at the end I realized his true purpose in making me his student. You see, he was obsessed with Records to a probably unhealthy level and wanted to ensure that even after death, they remained known. To him, they were the truly perfect form of memory. The memory of the world itself. I don't know how or why, but he clearly believed that I would be able to reach the pinnacle and thus chose me. He wanted to immortalize his existence through me and through the system," Villy said as he sighed.

"The old man had only ever asked me one favor, and it came in those final days. The only thing he ever asked me was to remember him and absorb his Records once and for all. He asked me to kill him," the Viper said, sadness in his voice.

"It was also only then I truly became aware of how much he suffered. You see, usually, memories are controlled. Your brain only pulls something up when you need to remember it, but for the First Sage, it wasn't like this. He remembered everything all the time. Don't even begin to think you can comprehend what that is like. He spent ages simply becoming able to function. But what truly made him suffer was remembering all that once was. Every little negative thing, every setback, every period of grief he experienced every day. Do you think negativity bias is bad for normal humans? For him, it was all-consuming. He never showed it, not truly, but after I got the Bloodline myself, I understood. It is said time heals all wounds, and trauma and grief eventually fade? To him, every second of every day was filled with those emotions, like he had experienced mere moments before," Villy explained, but Jake got an odd feeling.

As if he was not only talking about his old Master but himse-

"Before you say it... yes, I experience this negative downside too. However, there is a stark difference between him and me. First of all, I got the Bloodline after becoming a god and can handle all this far better. Second of all, I was not born with it and thus had ways to still separate it from the core of my being. Thirdly, and perhaps the most important one: his mindset differed from mine. He was more emotional on a base level, and he grieved more than I ever did. Even when I suffer, my first thought is not to grieve but to try and fix the problem. I comfort myself with pretty lies of being able to find a solution. And I can admit that even if the Bloodline has downsides, the benefits it brings are also exemplary. I wanted it for a reason," Villy said.

"Did you... you know?" Jake asked.

"Yes. How could I not fulfill the one request my Master ever made of me? I did not want to, but I respected him too much to refuse. However, as I said, then I like my pretty little lies. He wanted to be immortal but not alive, and he found his Path through me. Today he is forever immortalized through the Records of the multiverse, and to him, dying was simply a form of transcending above the mundane world. Transcending through me. I still remember his smile as his life faded, and that is the memory I choose to see over his times of suffering," the Viper said, Jake practically seeing his sad smile on the other end.

Jake just sat silently, not saying anything. He had never heard Villy speak this highly of anyone before, not even his fellow Primordials. There was always a quip in there, a joke about their shortcomings... but with this First Sage, there was only sad recognition.

Neither of them spoke for a while, even as the telepathic connection remained. Jake did not ask any of his usual questions, like if the Viper thought Jake would be able to match the old man if they were the same level or anything like that. Jake already knew that the answer wouldn't be one he wanted to hear... not necessarily because it would be a no but because of how pointless it was. A minute or so more passed before Villy sighed.

"The First Sage is the apex of why motivation and drive are important. He had the talent of a thousand geniuses but the will to claim power of none. There was no passion in anything he did, and he truly never cared to get stronger. There was only a sense of hopelessness, like the Path he once followed was impossible. Or, perhaps, in death, he got exactly what he wanted. I truly don't know, as even now, his mentality and mind are above my level of comprehension. All I know is that he was perhaps someone that was never meant to have existed, but that I am glad he did," Villy finally finished.

"Next time we meet," Jake said with a smile. *"Let's share a toast for the old man. While it was brief, I also learned some good stuff from him, and you are not the only one grateful he lived."*

"Let's do that," Villy said on the other side with a smile.

No more words were necessary as the connection was cut off soon after that, leaving Jake alone inside the stomach of Sandy. His mind was still filled with thoughts as he considered everything. While Jake had to recognize the old man had him beaten in energy control... Jake was not aiming to be the best at everything.

He was fine with just being the best at killing things.

Feeling his distance from Sylphie and Haven, Jake triangulated it and concluded he would soon reach his goal. The mountains the Fallen King had made his home were close to the ocean, and they would get straight there as long as they continued straight ahead.

But before he reached his destination, he had some alchemy to do in preparation.

Villy cut off with the connection with Jake as he smiled a bit to himself. Parts of his memory he had sealed away were now unleashed and flooded him as he remembered times he had chosen to forget. There were many things he did not tell Jake this time around, and he truly believed that was for the better.

Knowing of the First Sage was not necessarily a good thing. The comment he was perhaps someone that never meant to exist was not just an offhand one. It wasn't that it was bad he existed, but that his existence was never intended.

Because something he had not told Jake was that the day he had killed the old man was not the final time he had seen him. The system took many forms when it appeared in front of people... Jake had described it as a humanoid monotone figure. Others had described the system as a giant floating orb, some as winged beings and others like other humanoid forms reminiscent of their own races.

As for Villy? Every time he saw the system appear in any form, he met his first Master. If it was truly him, Villy did not know as it didn't act differently from any other system entity.

But he liked to think that the old man had achieved his goal and had achieved his own form of immortality.

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Chapter 545: Annoyingly Complicated

Jake and Sandy continued their journey over the ocean as Jake worked on the upcoming battle. His talk with Villy about the First Sage had been enlightening, and the upgraded Blood of the Malefic Viper would surely help with what he wanted to do. However, it was far from enough.

Unique Lifeforms were annoying opponents; Jake had no doubt about that. This particular Unique Lifeform he would encounter was one of ash and space magic as far as he could tell. It did not have a physical body but was more like a living domain. The domain was its Soulshape and seemed to encompass a large area at a time, allowing the Ashen Phantom Devourer to move its body – ash – anywhere within. The domain itself could also move at a fast speed if it so desired, making it a truly nightmarish being to face.

There was probably more to its abilities, but Jake got enough of an idea of what he was facing just from what he had heard so far. What he was facing would effectively be a giant elemental without many of the usual weaknesses of elementals. It would be a master at fleeing, too, according to the information Miranda had given him, so simply attacking it would not end well, even if Jake and the King somehow got it in an ambush and went all out.

The plan Jake had formed was to not fight Ell'Hakan but instead kill the Ashen Phantom Devourer by teaming up with the Fallen King. However, to do this, they needed to make sure they could actually kill the damn thing. Jake did not know how strong Ell'Hakan truly was or if he would even be able to successfully kill him, as he was an annoying

bastard who relied on more than just fighting. He had an annoying gut feeling that even if he, the King, and the Sword Saint went after the orange guy together, they would fail in killing him.

This is why Jake would instead try and take out the greatest asset this other Chosen had. No matter what, successfully recruiting a Unique Lifeform into your employ wasn't easy, and losing it would be a major hit to his fighting power.

Going back to having to actually kill the Ashen Phantom Devourer, there was one major problem. It was a creature specializing in ash *and* space magic. Jake had seen what Neil could do and now what Sandy was capable of, and he was completely certain he would have no way to chase down a peak D-grade Unique Lifeform using space magic, even if it was injured.

The Fallen King had also mentioned this as the biggest obstacle as, apparently, the King found himself slightly superior during their fights, primarily due to his home-field advantage. One had to remember that the King was, well, a King. He received benefits from an area he had claimed which allowed him to come out on top. Far from enough to actually get a victory and they were still nearly evenly matched. A single slip-up from one party could break the balance, or if one of them managed a breakthrough of some kind by upgrading a skill could result in either of them dying... the King the more likely to fall exactly due to this issue of the Ashen Phantom Devourer being far better at escaping.

This is where Jake came in. More accurately, his ability to be more than just a simple hunter with an arrow and bow. With his current toolkit, he had no way to kill this Ashen Phantom Devourer, and even teaming up with the King, they had no way to stop it, so this issue is what Jake would work on.

Like with the big blue mushroom once upon a time, Jake put on his thinking cap and began to theorize a solution. He needed to find a way to slow down the Unique Lifeform, but it couldn't be something that would instantly make it want to run away.

Sleeping Night Toxin was out of the question. That poison was frankly only good against human-sized or smaller foes, and this Ashen Phantom Devourer was the opposite of small. By sheer volume, considering it was a living domain, the only creature he had met with a larger Soulshape had to be the whale. Probably the giant sand worms too, but he would not know before actually seeing his foe. Which led to another problem.

Jake did not know what he was facing. Not truly. It wasn't like he could research his opponent either, as Unique Lifeforms had this annoying tendency to be unique. Samples were awesome when trying to make a counter to something, and getting a sample was absolutely impossible.

What he would make had to be a general poison not aimed at any particular enemy but be able to affect all Soulshapes. It had to be able to limit the mobility of this Ashen

Phantom Devourer, hopefully making it unable to flee with its giant domain-like body. If not, then at least slow it down significantly.

To do this, Jake would clearly need very high-level material. He would also need a good quantity of it. As for the type? Well, hemotoxins would not work. Necrotic poison was also out of the question as his opponent was not biological. So he would need it to be an ethtoxin – soul poison – or a neurotoxin. Ethtoxin and neurotoxin often went hand in hand, as ethtoxin was more classification of many different kinds of soul poison.

Neurotoxin would definitely be good. He had also been researching it quite a lot, so he had some confidence.

As stated many times prior, Jake was not a fan of fate-talk, but... some things were just too much to be a coincidence. Jake needed a good source of natural neurotoxin, and what had he just been handed not long ago? A whole crystal container full of the stuff.

[Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin (Ancient)] – The Lifeblood of a slain Emperor Urchin, an incredibly poisonous creature only found in areas with extremely dense water affinity. Its very blood is toxic to consume and especially toxic if directly injected. The Lifeblood is of a neurotoxin nature. Has many alchemical uses and is especially when combined with other neurotoxins or poisons with the water affinity.

By now, he was beginning to suspect there was some kind of foul play involved. Even if the Viper did not spy, had this Karroch god been watching the situation on Earth? While Jake could feel if people observed him, it was entirely possible the god had just kept an eye on everyone else.

Not that Jake would complain even if the weird beastmaster god had decided to help him out. Eil'Hakan had spent a long-ass time preparing and had his god help liberally, so it was only fair Jake also did a bit of cheating. It wasn't even Jake cheating... just someone else giving him an unexpected hand.

It wasn't the case either that this neurotoxin was enough and would instantly be able to accomplish his goal. The Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin was required to be injected to work correctly, so if Jake decided to use the poison as is, he would accomplish nothing. Chances are it would just harmlessly fall through the domain of the Unique Lifeform, and the only losses the Unique Lifeform would face would be whatever ash was hit.

Jake would need to make this Lifeblood into a workable ethtoxin that did not require injection but could be directly applied to an area. One way to often do this was by making it into a mist that was passively absorbed along with atmospheric mana or having it be naturally antagonistic towards anything with a soul in the area. Both options would work in this case, but Jake was not sure making a mist would be wise. First of all, what if the Unique Lifeform, just, you know, moved out of the mist? It would also very

obviously telegraph he was using poison. While Jake could try to mask it with the poison mist from Wings, he was not sure it would fool the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

So, he would have to find a subtle way to administer it while still fighting with the Ashen Phantom Devourer. A way to directly apply it to the Soulshape. As long as he administered enough, it should be adequate with his upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper, then controlling the poison.

Before he began doing anything, Jake consumed a bit more of the poison from the large crystal, making use of the large quantity he had. He knew it would not be a poison made in a day, but luckily he had a bit of time before he reached his target... and even if he was too slow, well, he could just tell Sandy to enjoy eating some more stuff.

Heck... maybe he could even make the worm find some stuff he needed for the concoction.

Caleb leaned back in his office chair and read over the recent reports. Four hundred and twenty-four. That was the number of City Lord or other high-level leaders of cities that the Court of Shadows had eliminated over the last many weeks, only to have them replaced with leaders from the United Cities Alliance. It was... a lot. All of these cities where they had killed people were also fringe members of the Holy Church or independent cities that did not ally with anyone. Needless to say, the influence of the United Cities Alliance was growing rapidly, and they had prepared for this takeover for a long time.

A knock on the door made him look up as he raised his hand and made it swing open.

Matteo walked in and handed him a token. "Job's done."

"Good work as usual," Caleb acknowledged as he took it. The soul remnants in the token confirmed the kill. The way the tokens worked was that they recorded the actual notification of a given kill, something which resonated with the Truesoul of the target. It was a truly foolproof form of authentication that nothing less than a Transcendant skill or a Bloodline could circumvent.

"How many more targets?" the most efficient assassin in the Court asked.

"Only seventeen without people already on the contract," Caleb said with a sigh. "Four of which ended with the given assassin dying, so security in those locations will be heightened. Once done, chances are Arthur will just come with more, though."

"Are those four close enough for me to take them all?" Matteo asked. For original chapters go to [novel•fire•met](http://novel.firemet.com)

“No, only two of them are. I will have Nadia take one of the others and send team one to handle the last one once they return,” Caleb shook his head. He considered going himself, but he was frankly too busy these days. At least the levels were good.

Matteo nodded as he held out his hand. Caleb took out the given tokens with the information on the targets and their locations and handed them to him. The man looked them over but didn't leave. Instead, he took a seat in another chair and looked at Caleb from across the table.

“What?” Caleb asked.

“Are you really okay with all this?” Matteo asked. “We are indirectly working against your brother no matter how we spin this. Compromising your personal values like this cannot lead to anything good.”

Caleb sighed and leaned back.

“What was the state of the last city you went to?” Caleb asked Matteo.

“It was an utter shithole,” the assassin answered without hesitation.

“Yeah, see, that is where all of this gets a bit more annoyingly complicated. The reason why these takeovers from the United City Alliance have been successful is that they are taking over from someone worse. Who would have thought that a system of governance decided solely by who was the best at killing stuff would lead to not-so-ideal City Lords?” the Judge of the Court said.

“If we were further fucking over the people of Earth just trying to survive, I would have less conflicted feelings, but as things are, I cannot say what we're doing isn't... good. Say what you want, but the United Cities Alliance cares about the approval of the public. They are also generally growing, and anywhere they go tends to improve for the better. I have even heard some leaders voluntarily reach out to join the United Cities Alliance and allow actual administrators from the Alliance to take over, leading to better-run cities. Who we're killing aren't pillars of the community, it is more that we are removing a few moldy support beams threatening to ruin the stability of the entire structure.”

“Doesn't change the fact you are working against the interest of your family,” Matteo said.

“No, it doesn't... but it does make this entire shitshow a whole lot more complicated. Also, rather than think of it as working against Jake, I would rather see it as doing him a favor, you know?” Caleb said with a slightly cheeky smile.

Matteo frowned. “How is any of this doing him a favor?”

“See, I would agree that usually making life harder for someone is a dick move, but for my brother, he tends to enjoy it. Moreover, when he returns and gets into action, I hope that a better future can come from it. He will not take this lying down.”

“What if he does not return in time? What if he does and Arthur still gets voted World Leader?” Matteo asked.

Caleb considered for a while. “I see three scenarios. The least likely is that we will simply remain. My brother leaves, and we all handy dandy hang out on Earth and use it as a branch, with Arthur being a nice ally. The second one is Arthur winning, and we leave. Even if the Court is against this, then I am willing to simply leave the Court altogether and take my family with me. Hopefully, the Order of the Malefic Viper will take us, and my gut tells me that the Malefic One would hide our family even if Jake died as a final gift to him. Finally, the most likely thing to happen if Arthur does become World Leader? This planet goes to shit, and Jake hunts him down and kills him; any kind of advantages granted by being World Leader be damned. I don’t see Valhal doing shit about it either, as while I didn’t see the contract, they are not dumb enough to not leave themselves an out and force them into a fight with the Order of the Malefic Viper.”

“Neither of those options appears particularly positive,” Matteo shook his head. “What about if the Malefic’s Chosen does return? Earth will not be the same after this, no matter what. Who will become World Leader?”

“That,” Caleb said as he tried to sound smart, “I don’t know.”

Ell’Hakan stared at the sun slowly descending towards the horizon as he focused. Soon it would be time. Taking out his trident, he made sure it was in top condition. He had made a small house in the middle of the plains outside of Haven and away from anywhere the humans lived. The reason was simple: he needed the Chosen to fight without any distractions.

The sun above bared down on him as he absorbed its light, the surrounding plains faintly glowing gold from the potent energy of the star. Everything was prepared, and he was ready for the fight. The plains were ready, and his domain was set.

Looking out the corner of his eyes, he saw one of the two servants stationed in their area make their way over. They had been placed in Haven to keep a look on things and make sure everything was going according to plan.

“My Lord,” the woman said as she stopped in front of him and kneeled. “The natives are still unable to break through the defenses created by the Verdant Witch and take control of the Pylon. I do not believe our interference is required unless the Malefic’s Chosen takes longer than anticipated to return.”

Ell’Hakan nodded. “As long as they do not manage to take control before there is less than a month to the World Congress, there shall be no worries. By then, it will be too

late for the humans to claim it in time. Keep up the work and ensure things continue as they are.”

“Yes, my Lord. May I know what the intent is if the Malefic’s Chosen does not return according to predictions?” the servant asked.

“Predictions. Plural. Only a feeble plan fails if a few factors are out of place. The framework shall remain, and the objective accomplished. Have no doubt either... I believe he will make it back just in time,” Ell’Hakan simply said.

“Now go. Sunset approaches.”

The servant nodded as she rushed back towards Haven. Ell’Hakan did not look after her but instead stared at the orange glow on the clouds above and the sun slowly descending below the horizon. He sat down and marveled at the beauty of the celestial object.

Faint rays of sunlight licked his skin, and the orange glow faintly intensified. Minutes passed as the sun fully disappeared below the horizon. Staring upwards, he saw the clouds obstruct him. Gripping his trident, he raised it and felt the resonance as a beam of faint light descended. The clouds parted as the moon appeared, lighting up the blue tattoos lining his body. The plains themselves also took on a faint blue color and glowed.

Power filled him as he smiled and bowed his head towards the moon before turning and bowing towards where the sun had gone down. “Your child thanks you. Mother. Father.”

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Chapter 546: Sandy's Personal Aquarium

“I feel bad for them. Imagine just living your happy life in the water, and then suddenly, this naked monster comes down and forces you to stab them several times as you try to get away in fear. But the monster refuses and just keeps smashing his body into you in a ridiculous display of self-harm. The confusion when he then just leaves with several of your spikes in his chest must only make it worse, too,” Sandy said in a highly judgemental tone.

Jake was sitting on a jagged rock sticking out of the deep ocean, completely naked. Well, naked, as long as you didn’t count the many quills sticking out of many places on his body. He ignored Sandy as he meditated, feeling the venom from the many quills

course through his body. He purposefully did not eliminate it right away but slowly integrated it into his body.

He had gotten super lucky, and they had come across an area filled with sea urchins. No C-grades were around, but thousands of D-grades dwelled below, and Jake had jumped into the water with glee once he discovered them. Sense of the Malefic Viper had detected them even from a distance as they were all highly toxic and had powerful neurotoxins on their quills. From how the venom felt, Jake assumed these were all weaker versions of the C-grade he had gained the Lifeblood of. Probably also weaker variants. However, what mattered was that their venom was similar in nature.

This meant Jake had just stumbled across a living treasure trove of potential ingredients. It was also a great way to feed Palate and allowed him to get more familiar with the Lifeblood of the Sea Urchin Emperor. Consuming the actual liquid was only worth it in small quantities due to the diminishing return of Palate when eating something new. Yet he still wanted to become more familiar with it, so these lesser D-grade variants were perfect.

There was the negative side effect of Sandy being bored of waiting. Jake had spent about a day here at the many sea urchins, and he knew Sandy was getting more and more impatient. It was weird that a C-grade was so much in a rush for no reason, but Jake assumed it was just in Sandy's nature.

"I told you to find a solution then," Jake said in return, briefly exiting meditation. *"As long as the sea urchins are here, we stay here. At least for a while longer."*

"You just wait!" Sandy said with indignation. *"I will show you!"*

"Do just that," Jake said teasingly. *"Back to meditation."*

Sandy tried to say more, but Jake blocked the worm out. He opened a single eye and saw Sandy wriggle in anger up in the air, making him smirk as he reentered meditation. The poison still flowed through his body, and he absorbed it all over the next hour or so before diving under the waves again.

The Sea Urchins were all large porcupine-like creatures and were pretty much just oversized versions of the pre-system animals. The sea had many parts where it was not as deep, and this was one such place as they are close to a few islands, meaning he could make it to the seafloor only by diving a few hundred meters down.

Jake happily swam down to a big crowd of the animals, and annoyingly enough, they now no longer attacked him on sight but instead just hunkered down and erected their spikes. Not to worry, Jake could make them attack him anyway as he just barrelled into one and got himself impaled. Well, okay, not impaled, more stabbed a bit.

Each sea urchin's main body was about the size of a small two-person car, with their spikes a bit longer than that. Their sizes did vary a bit, and there were some variants here and here with different forms of venoms. Jake wanted the ones with white tips on their quills while avoiding the ones with blackened quills. He did try to get stabbed by them a bit, but they just had necrotic poison, so it wasn't that exciting.

Mind you, he hadn't gotten stabbed on purpose the first time around. These sea urchins hunted as a flock, and the first time he dove down, they had all attacked him. Their tactic was to form a barrier of themselves all around him and slowly incircle him before stabbing their prey to death.

Jake reckoned this was also the cause of their mixed toxins. Neurotoxins would make it harder for the prey to flee, while the necrotic poison would slowly whittle down and kill it. It was a good strategy, and Jake could even see C-grades die when a thousand sea urchins decided to attack. Especially larger C-grades would find themselves injected with ludicrous levels of venom.

However, this strategy of theirs quite frankly sucked against small targets. It was clear that Jake did not fit in the underwater meta where most powerful creatures were massive, and those of small size moved in huge groups. He was a singular small person, so only a handful of urchins could prick him at once. If all of them struck him at once, Jake could not come out of it alive simply due to the sheer physical damage, but as things were, they were simply not a threat. The source of this content is

novel *fire* met

This time around, Jake spent a few minutes down there before coming up again and integrating the venom. The last time he went down there, he killed a few to consume their Lifeblood, but sadly the system was annoying in that regard. He already knew that when a creature died, its remnant Records would be infused into select parts of their bodies. If it was weak enough, sometimes no item at all would be born, but in most cases, something would come out of it. The most usual thing was a Beastcore, and so was it with these sea urchins. If they had a Beastcore, the Lifeblood would be useless, and one of the spikes could only get infused, making it into great material for a spear but shit-tier material for Jake. He even had one of them not result in an item at all, indicating these were low-tier creatures. He could kill enough and get some blood, but he didn't feel comfortable killing hundreds for only one or two to give him Lifeblood.

Hence why Jake continued this process of diving down, getting stabbed, and going up to integrate it.

The next day Jake also began to forcefully extract some venom from some of them for further testing. On the third day, it appeared that Sandy had had enough.

As usual, Jake was sitting on his rock and meditating as the worm swept down and pushed him hard, sending him splashing into the water.

“Stop ignoring me!” Sandy yelled, finally getting Jake’s attention.

“What?” Jake said as he stopped ignoring the worm and got out of the water. *“Didn’t you say you were fine with waiting a bit longer yesterday?”*

“That was yesterday!” Sandy once more yelled madly. *“Also! Since you are not killing these things, do you need to stay here?”*

“Well, I gotta go where they go,” Jake answered with a shrug. He had taunted Sandy for a reason and hoped he had gotten through to the worm.

“Great!” Sandy said, suddenly sounding a bit happier as Jake got a feeling he had indeed managed to get his point across.

Sandy flew past Jake and down into the water as he saw the worm suck up seawater like a vacuum. Space distorted and warped as the C-grade went further down until finally, Sandy reached the seafloor where all the urchins were. The vacuum then got stronger as a whirlpool formed, sucking in hundreds of tons of sand along with several hundred of the sea urchins.

Jake caught on quick and smiled. *“I only need the ones with the white-tipped quills.”*

Sandy kept sucking for a minute or so more, eating close to a thousand of the D-grades, all of them between level 150 and 170. After being done sucking up, the massive worm closed its mouth for a bit before opening it again, spitting out large sea urchins like they were watermelon seeds. Jake counted them all and saw nearly nine hundred had been tossed out.

The worm then swam up and also chomped down on Jake, sending him back to his usual cave-like stomach. Outside, Jake saw Sandy land and lay down on the large rock Jake had been sitting on earlier.

“So...”

“Ugh...” Sandy groaned. *“I think I ate too much. My stomach hurts... give me a moment.”*

Jake patiently waited for ten or so minutes. Throughout this time, Sandy sometimes spat out some water, some of it containing a few quills here and there. After these ten minutes, Sandy once more rose up and took to the air.

“Better thank me for making a water stomach,” Sandy complained.

“No one asked you to,” Jake chuckled. He had just heavily implied she should do something like this.

“Coercion through boredom is literally torture, and how is torturing someone not forcing them?” Sandy retorted.

“Rather than discuss the definition of torture, how about you explain what you did?” Jake asked curiously. In all honesty, even after all his time, he had no idea how Sandy worked.

“Fine, fine,” Sandy agreed. “I spent these last few days figuring out how to make a bigger stomach. You see, I thought that since I can eat you and get stuff when you do the alchemy, why can’t I eat other creatures and maybe get something for that? Even if it doesn’t work like this, I can keep them around, and you can stop being so boring.”

“So I can go there somehow?” Jake asked, unsure how the setup of Sandy’s stomachs worked. His Sphere of Perception looked outside of Sandy while inside, only revealing the room he was in. He assumed this was linked to him being unable to see inside of people’s bodies, even with his sphere.

“Yeah... two seconds,” Sandy said. Two seconds passed before, off to the side, and a hole appeared in the floor. It looked like a manhole without the cover, and Jake saw water within.

“Is this a portal?”

“I guess you can say that,” Sandy answered shruggingly. “I don’t really know. I am just going by feel, you know?”

Jake did know and decided not to argue further. Jumping into the manhole, Jake felt like he was in the ocean again. His sphere instantly spread out, and Jake was taken aback. The stomach Jake was usually in was about the size of a large room, but this place put any aquarium on pre-system Earth to shame... shit; it put all of them put together to shame.

Jake’s sphere could fully spread without him being able to see the bottom. Swimming downwards, he soon got a scope of things, and Jake estimated the entire stomach was around a kilometer deep and spherical in shape. The bottom was covered in the eaten sand, with the walls the usual rock-like surface Jake’s stomach had originally been before Sandy turned them transparent.

“This is larger than I thought,” Jake said. “How many of these can you make?”

“A few, max,” Sandy answered. “It drains quite a lot of energy if I want to keep the environment healthy. I also probably shouldn’t keep those things in there for too long, though they do seem docile enough.”

“Probably shouldn’t, no,” Jake agreed. It was good they were solid two out of ten in the smarts department. The one point was only given due to their teamwork. Jake wasn’t sure how to feel if Sandy began abducting more intelligent species.

Jake quickly left the water stomach again and entered his own stomach. The manhole that was there remained to now give him easy access to materials. Sandy, in the outside world, could finally fly forward, albeit a bit slower than before, as the worm got used to having eaten so much stuff.

As he looked at Sandy fly, Jake could only begin to imagine what kinds of things the Cosmic Genesis Worm could do in the future. How large spaces could the worm have if they were already this spacious in C-grade? Would an S-grade Cosmic Genesis Worm have entire solar systems within its stomach?

The thought was insane but not out of the question based on what he had seen so far.

Shaking his head, Jake returned to the task at hand. He was getting better at using neurotoxins with every passing day, but more than that, Jake was now finally forming an idea of what to do. The sea urchins had given him quite the inspiration as Jake had asked himself a question... what if, instead of trying to subtly inject the neurotoxin into the Ashen Phantom Devourer over a long period of time, he would do the exact opposite?

What if he bombarded it with ungodly amounts of neurotoxin all at once in an attack it could not avoid? For him to, metaphorically speaking, attack with a thousand smaller doses all at once?

The Fallen King focused on regenerating the severed leg as it slowly regrew. Reforming it was far more difficult than for a normal biological lifeform – if he even was one - as the Fallen King did not possess any Vitality. Or vital energies at all, for that matter. His body was not truly flesh and blood, after all.

He had fought this Ashen Phantom Devourer dozens of times by now. Every exchange ended with the other Unique Lifeform fleeing after taking significant damage. Every time he came out on top. He was winning the battles... but... losing the war.

The Fallen King had yet to fully recover for weeks now. He still had a few golden orbs remaining to recover himself, but those had been running out fast too. His issue lay in the fundamental difference between himself and the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

While he had to heal using time, the Ashen Phantom Devourer healed by being true to its namesake. It devoured other beasts in the surrounding area and dove beneath the earth to consume those who resided in the subterranean world. As a result, the other Unique Lifeform recovered slightly faster every time.

And it knew it, gladly fighting the month-long battle of attrition.

Losing a leg had been the biggest loss so far he had taken. The Fallen King had attempted to conserve resources and ended up losing the leg in the process. He knew he should have used his golden claw, but a moment of hesitation had nearly proved fatal.

Neither of them had shown any trump cards either. They simply consumed too much energy, and both knew that they risked leaving an opening. There were also some good things, such as the King now far more easily dealing damage to the Ashen Phantom Devourer and Telekinesis was now solely a defensive tool. What truly mattered was striking the soul of his foe.

Despite all this, the King was not overly worried. Alone, he would perhaps lose after a long time. Even that was uncertain as he still had his most powerful attack remaining, which should give him a high chance of at least ensuring mutual destruction. Again, this also assumed the King would even die if he was killed, considering his peculiar relationship with the hunter.

Not that the Fallen King wanted these fights to end just yet. Neither of them did. Killing the Ashen Phantom Devourer was one goal, yes, but a more important goal was proving himself superior to the other Unique Lifeform. A goal only slightly surpassing enjoying fighting a foe of equal level able to fight on equal footing with himself.

Sadly, the fight would end in due time, as the King did have one more weapon to deploy. He was a King, after all, and while he was not a subject, the little hunter was certainly someone worth having assist you.

He had spoken to the little witch already, and he was more than prepared. In fact, he was excited to see what the little hunter had cooked up.

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Chapter 547: In This Time Of Change

The days passed one by one as Earth had finally begun finding some semblance of stability. Settlements and larger cities had survived the many beasts attacking and made adequate defenses in preparation for more attacks. Some cities still fell here and there, but for the most part, there was peace.

Some smaller teleportation networks had even appeared, linking allied cities to one another. The Holy Church had some up and running relatively fast, allowing them to quickly move between their cities to assist in case of attacks. They were working

towards something, and none knew exactly what it was, but it did include many high-level members of the Church making their way back to Sanctdomo - likely one of the reasons why they had rushed to re-establish a teleportation network. Out of all the factions, the Court of Shadows was perhaps the most effective, primarily with their ability to quickly not necessarily link allied cities but link locations of different networks close to each other, and then just melding in and making use of other's teleporters to move around fast.

And move fast they did. Because another source of stability was, surprisingly enough, a huge number of assassinations. Anyone who wasn't blind could see this was done with the United Cities Alliance behind the job based on how they always had a candidate ready to take control within mere hours of the current City Lord dying. Candidates who had been in the cities for months and slowly gained a following and influence.

To the surprise of many, the alien invaders that the United Cities Alliance worked with did nothing during this time. They were spotted here and there and did, in some rare instances, step in and help protect cities from attacks. Even then, no one knew what their goal was.

The faction with the biggest change was the Noboru Clan, which had been split into three separate internal factions. One of them supported the United Cities Alliance, one surprisingly wanted to join the Holy Church, and a final one wanted to stay fully independent. Some fringe members also remained, including a group who still believed the Patriarch lived.

This split led to them losing many cities to outside forces and even invading each other using non-violent methods and political scheming. They also dealt with beasts far worse, and the base of the once powerful clan was shaken. Without a singular, powerful leader to unite them, it looked as they were headed towards collapse or, at the very least, being split into smaller factions. So far, at least no significant violence had taken place, and differences were being worked through, but it was a losing battle. Each schism simply had too different goals.

The only place that could be said to have been oddly unaffected was Haven. Even with the City Lord gone, things mostly continued as usual. People from the United Cities Alliance had come but had yet been able to take over the Pylon.

There was also the issue of Miranda having been a very popular City Lord. Surprisingly, then the majority of citizens were indifferent to the true owner of the city as he was never really around. They knew he existed, but that was the end of his involvement. Well, besides that, they did know that Miranda had been appointed by him, meaning he couldn't be that bad in their eyes.

All of these and more were the reason why the temporary City Lord had not become a member of the United City Alliance but an old leader. Phillip, the former leader of the Fort, had with reluctance agreed to take up the mantle. His reluctance was part of the

reason why the United Cities Alliance agreed, and he was also generally not considered part of the Malefic's Chosen's entourage. Another reason was the understanding that it was only till an actual City Lord was deployed there.

Be it by the rightful one returning or a newcomer taking over.

Besides that, there was the Fort. A place where nothing at all had happened. There was not really a true local leader of the Fort besides Phillip in Haven, but most would look towards Arnold if they had to name one. Look towards him both figuratively and literally as a large part of the city was a metal dome that housed his personal workshop.

In the section of the world already controlled by the United Cities Alliance, it was also mostly calm. Paradise was a sore spot for many City Leaders, but none dared to challenge them, especially not after Renato made ample use of Sylphie and Carmen both residing there. Even if saying they resided there was somewhat fallacious, considering they had not been there for a long time since leaving for the jungle to hunt.

Finally... we had some people on Earth who didn't truly know where they belonged, with this conflict only shining a brighter light on that fact.

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"You need to," the woman said in a comforting tone. "Not for anyone but yourself. You can prepare a thousand more things, but you knew this day would come eventually. You are ready, William. You say the system says you have yet to find your Path... I think this is the final piece you are missing."

William listened to Ms. Kim, his former psychiatrist, but he still felt a shiver run down his spine. He knew she was right and that she was telling him only confirmed it. He felt like she was the only person he could ever be open around, and it had been hard not seeing her for so long due to all the tasks Master had sent him to do.

"But the nightmares still haven't stopped," William muttered. "The random visions here and there..."

"Because all you have is an idea built up in your mind. He is nothing more than a concept, a representation of fear. If you confront him, you will see that reality isn't as scary as the monster your imagination has created," Ms. Kim tried to further comfort him.

With a sigh, William just nodded. Logically he knew it. The monster was not immortal or unbeatable; the alien had shown that. Even if it was not a decisive victory, he had come out on top. However, that didn't mean William would stand a chance.

"If you don't rid yourself of your fear before evolving, you risk internalizing it further, truly making it part of who you are. Is that really what you want? No one says you have to

beat anyone, just that you have to confront him. I have met him, and while I do agree he is intimidating, he is, in the end, still human,” Ms. Kim kept encouraging him.

William’s Master had been silent, too, in this recent time. In fact, he had not spoken to William since his last conversation about being stuck at D-grade, where he had been told to figure it out himself. This had only added to his anxiety as he would at least have confidence meeting the monster if that meeting had been planned by Master.

He had done all he was told with the beasts, and they were on their own now. William had never been tasked with fighting anyone or anything during this time, and he had barely leveled his class. Not since returning from Nevermore. In Nevermore, William had killed enough to nearly reach the D-grade cap of his class and made significant progress in his profession. By all accounts, he should be ready after another long period of refining himself. Did he think he was the strongest human on Earth? No, no, he was not, but he was not that far off. The Judge of the Court was about the peak of humanity outside of that monster, and William had confidence against him.

“Okay,” William finally relented.

Ms. Kim smiled. “Just remember there is no shame in retreat and that you do not go to fight. You go to confront your fears and find your Path.”

William nodded again as he sighed. It wouldn’t be that simple, would it?

“Ms. Kim?” William asked.

“Yes?” she asked, a bit confused by his tone.

“Thanks for everything,” he said. He knew it wasn’t true to their agreement, but he couldn’t help himself from giving her a hug. “Say hi to little Seo for me, okay? Just in case.”

Ms. Kim, to his surprise, returned his hug. “As I said... just retreat if it gets too dangerous, okay?”

She let go of him, and William also backed off.

“You are not the same person you were back then, William. You can overcome this.”

William nodded again, not entirely sure about that. Not the first point, but the second one.

Saying his goodbyes, William went towards the nearby teleporter as he appeared in a damp cavern. He felt the presence of the C-grade space jellyfish wash over him as it emerged from the water.

"You have come to a decision?" the C-grade asked him.

"Yes," William said. "The moment that *he* appears send me there. No matter where or who that monster is facing."

"So it shall be," the C-grade agreed without arguing anything. William sat down on the ground as he meditated and prepared himself. He did not know how long it would take before the monster made his presence known, but William knew he had to go there. Not because he feared the monster would die, making him lose his chance to face him. No, that sentiment was utterly ludicrous to him.

He would go because... Ms. Kim was probably right. The monster was the reason he could not evolve, and he would have to face his fears if he wanted to prove his Path.

Days had turned to weeks as the pair of human and worm had journeyed across the ocean. One had done alchemy, and the other flew while they talked and discussed whatever sights they came across. Jake had only gotten into a single more fight, and Sandy had mainly digested what had already been eaten earlier on their trip. However... all good things must come to an end.

Sadness was in the air as the shoreline entered their sight. Jake had already been spat out of Sandy and was flying alongside the worm at a leisurely pace.

"It is beginning to hurt a bit," Sandy said as they got closer to the shoreline. *"Not actual pain, but more a warning that it will come..."*

Jake nodded. They had both kind of known this would happen and had accepted it. Only a dozen of kilometers from the shoreline, Jake saw vast mountains rise, and he knew that in there the Fallen King currently was. It was at the edge of the ocean... and the edge of what was effectively a safety zone for humanity.

The small territory humanity occupied was not much compared to the rest of the globe. Outside of that territory, there were no limitations on C-grades or anything like that, but inside there were. Jake and Sandy were approaching this safe zone where Sandy, as a C-grade, could no longer keep going.

Soon, they both stopped, just floating in the air a kilometer from the shoreline.

"Stupid system rules," Sandy complained.

"Yeah," Jake agreed. He really didn't want to split from Sandy for several reasons, the first of which was that he had no way to find his wormy friend again. Sylphie he had a bond with, but Sandy was an entirely different sort of animal. A Cosmic Genesis Worm also traveled a lot around due to its nature of consuming natural treasures in insane quantities, making his C-grade pal even harder to pin down and find again.

“You gotta go?” Sandy asked. “Why not just ignore all the stupid human stuff and keep hunting? Does it really matter? Oh! We could even maybe just go somewhere else? Like, there is an entire universe to explore, right? Let’s go there! After you evolve, though...”

Jake could not help but smile. *“I need to go. I have been thinking about this situation a lot, and honestly, this entire conflict is partly my fault. It is time I made a decision and finally decided. But I would be more than up for exploring with you another time, okay?”*

Sandy wriggled a bit, clearly not happy. Jake just rubbed the side of the massive worm, not even sure if they could feel it. If not the physical touch, he was sure Sandy could at least feel his intentions. He honestly would like to just fly around and adventure with Sandy and even just head straight up and into space. Shit, even just exploring what was up there in the sky before reaching space would be...

Wait a fucking minute.

“Hey, Sandy... you wanna try something?” Jake asked with a grin.

“What?” Sandy asked, perking up a little.

Jake looked towards the sky. *“See if this damn restriction has a vertical limit.”*

Sandy took a moment to comprehend what he meant before getting it. Jake barely had a chance to react before the massive worm bent its body and chomped down on him. As he didn’t resist, he was thrown into the old room again, as outside, the surroundings were already moving.

The water below was getting further away as the clouds above approached with alarming speed, as it was time to see how far they could go. Jake assumed that a long cylinder of restricted space didn’t just extend endlessly out of Earth, and he had already seen that the restrictions lessened the deeper you went into the ground, so why should it not be the same when heading upwards?

“I will admit it is a creature I have not seen before,” the scaled god said with skepticism. “But that does not mean much when they are still in C-grade. For such special beasts, I can see many Paths that only result in death.”

“Very insightful,” Vilastromoz said with a smirk. “You know, I thought something similar once upon a time when I stumbled across this incredibly stupid lizard with a few too many heads rolling around in a swamp. Turns out that lizard became this little lizard became a slightly smarter lizard with way too many heads. Oh, and a god or something.” Chapters first released on **novel*fire*net**

“Master...” Snappy – or the Lord Protector as some liked to call him – said with exasperation and slight embarrassment. “I am simply saying that it is a gamble that I am

uncertain of if I should take. There are risks involved, you know that. You chose to make a bet because the human truly was extraordinary, but this creature is not in the same realm as him.”

“I would never force you to do anything like this,” the Viper did agree. “But I am saying that I see potential. I have never come across a creature like this before either, and from what it has displayed so far, even you must admit you are impressed. And... getting in on the ground floor, especially before some other god swoops in, is a good idea. The worm is hidden by Jake’s Shroud due to its current proximity to him, but that may very well change. If you act now and your gamble succeeds, the gains will be that much better.”

Snappy fell silent for a bit, with Villy just staring at him. He had made the Lord Protector observe all his recorded memories of the worm – perfect photographic memory and the ability to playback those memories being a perk of his Bloodline. That is what his old friend had done over the last few days as he evaluated the worm.

As for why Vilastromoz was having Snappy do it? Because his Path was more closely aligned with the worm than the Viper’s own. The Path of consumption and devouring all in his Path was far more like Snappy than the very selective Viper.

“Perhaps,” Snappy sighed, “perhaps it has been too long since I had one of my own, and in this time of change, perhaps taking a bit of a risk is only right.”

Vilastromoz failed to hold back a smile. He truly did not believe his old friend would regret it.

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Sick.

Hello there. TLDR: No chapter, I am sick, may not be any new chaps for the rest of the year.

It sucks, but I have been sick since the weekend, and it sadly has only gotten worse. Not covid for those wondering, more likely a bad case of influenza or a throat infection.

While I could try to soldier through, I really don't want to. Especially not with Christmas in only a few days, where it would suck having to stay home. So I want to rest and hopefully feel better.

I had planned on taking a few days off between Christmas and New Years anyway, but it seems I will push that forward. Dependent on how I am feeling, there may not be any more chapters this year, but if I get better I hope to post a chapter or two still before the new year. We will see.

Apologies everyone. I know it sucks. Either way, I wish you all happy holidays and hope you have a good one. I will go back to bed now.

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Chapter 548: All Hail Sandy

They had just made it above the clouds as Jake felt a ping by Villy. *"Hey, Jake, can I borrow you for a second?"* Chapters first released on `novel*fire*net`

"Sure, what's up?" he asked.

"No, I mean in a more literal sense. Can I borrow your body to do something?"

"I guess?" Jake kind of agreed.

"Great!"

Jake felt the Viper descend. It was like Jake's aura got mixed with something else, and he then felt a third presence enter, confusing him even more. At that moment, was very happy that he had a strong soul before he felt the sheer level of pressure upon it as he channeled but a fraction of the Viper's aura. Sandy also noticed as the worm stopped in mid-air before asking him in a confused tone.

"Uhm, I just got some weird pop-up, and I think it might be a scam?"

"What is it?" Jake asked curiously, soldiering through. Had Villy decided to bless Sandy? That would actually be awesome, and he was mentally slapping himself for not having thought of giving the worm one earlier.

"You see, I got this Blessing thing offered like you have, right?" Sandy asked with doubt.

"Yeah?" Jake asked. So it was Villy giving a ble-

“And... well, I just feel like if you have to include that something is True in the description, isn't that kind of red flag that it isn't? Like, if it is real, why do you need to put so much emphasis on it you know?”

Wait, what? Jake asked himself, utterly perplexed at what Sandy was asking. Include True? Did it maybe say something about it coming from someone with a True Blessing?

“Can you explain what it says in detail?” Jake asked Sandy.

“Okay, it asks if I want to talk to this god or something about receiving a True Blessing? It is very weird,” Sandy answered.

Jake, even more confused, asked: *“What is the name of this god?”*

“The Boundless Hydra.”

Who the fuck is that? Jake asked himself for a moment before a lightbulb went off. Sandy: likes eating stuff. Snappy: likes eating stuff. It all suddenly made sense; they were a match made in heaven.

“Hey, Villy, is Snappy really offering Sandy his True Blessing?” Jake asked the Viper.

“Yes, but an emphasis on offer. It will be up to them to reach an agreement if your wormy friend agrees to a conversation on the topic,” Villy explained. *“You will have to function as a conduit during this process, and it will be a bit straining, but you should be fine.”*

Jake nodded, totally fine with that, before talking to Sandy: *“Yep, I know who the Boundless Hydra is. The offering is a True Blessing, the same as what I have but from a different god. I would recommend for you to have this talk with the guy, okay?”*

“Oh, okay,” Sandy agreed. *“As long as it isn't a scam.”*

Villy's presence intensified as Jake felt the god channel power through him. He allowed it all to go through as he got a slight headache. Jake closed his eyes as Sandy had also completely frozen in the real world as the Hydra and Cosmic Genesis Worm spoke.

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Snappy had disappeared and returned to his own realm for the conversation. Forever true to tradition and all that. Then again, giving a True Blessing could not be done the usual way. The two souls had to meet as the transference was more intimate and intense than any other Blessing. Doing it in the divine realm of a god was the easiest for both parties.

Vilastromoz smirked as he wondered what kind of monster he was helping to create.

Worm and Hydra met.

The Lord Protector – also known as the Boundless Hydra – had assumed his true form. A mass of heads too difficult for a mortal mind to comprehend appeared before the insignificantly small Cosmic Genesis Worm. The Hydra soon collected its form to only be a nine-headed hydra.

Two figures simply existed for a few seconds before the worm opened its mouth and began sucking.

“This place tastes weird.”

“You are within my divine realm, and what you are consuming is my energy. I am known as the Boundless Hydra, Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper,” the Hydra spoke.

“Wow!” Sandy said, impressed. *“That is such a long name! I am just Sandy, pleased to meet you, the Boundless Hydra, Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper.”*

Silence followed as neither spoke for a period after. Sandy just sucked in some more of the atmosphere and looked around, clearly unsure how to act or what to do. The Hydra, on the other hand, just observed.

“Tell me, Sandy. Why do you travel with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?” the Hydra asked the worm after a few minutes.

“What a silly question,” Sandy scoffed. *“We’re friends!”*

“That is now. The Chosen of the Malefic One will keep walking a Path of conquest and power. He will grow in power without end, and his true stage is not your small planet but the multiverse as a whole. Are you willing to follow him that far? Are you willing to do what is necessary to remain someone useful to him even as he soars towards the apex?” the Boundless Hydra asked.

“What do you mean when you say do what is necessary? I am just doing what I do. I eat stuff, grow and get stronger and better at eating stuff. I am not doing that to be useful to him; that would be super silly, wouldn’t it?” Sandy asked in return.

“Does that mean that you intend to abandon the Malefic’s Chosen if you find it convenient?” the ancient god asked the mortal worm.

“Maybe? Who knows? We are friends, and Jake says that friends don’t owe each other anything. They help because they want to, not because they have to. Also! I remember him once saying never say never, so I am never going to say never. Wait, I did just say never a lot of times... anyway! Jake is my friend, so that is that. Stop talking about silly

stuff like abandoning others. If anything, he was the one about to abandon me just now!" Sandy said with much gusto, not a shred of fear within the worm.

The Hydra fell silent for a few seconds, seeming to contemplate the answer. *"Would you give your life for the Malefic's Chosen?"*

"No, I am pretty sure that would kill me, and I wouldn't like that."

"If you are given the choice of betraying and backstabbing the Malefic's Chosen for a tremendously powerful treasure, would you do it?"

"That sounds like a dumb thing to do and also super impractical. How do I even stab him when all my teeth are gone?" Sandy perfectly answered. *"Also! I am pretty sure I wouldn't be able to stab him in the back even if I had teeth. He is mega good at knowing when something is trying to hit him from behind."*

"Do you ever think you will be sated? When will you be satisfied with devouring treasures? Is it truly a Path you want to follow for eternity? A never-ending cycle of consumption?" the Hydra kept questioning.

"Maybe not? Sometimes I also like to lay around and digest and stuff. But after that, I will definitely need to head out for a snack. Why would someone not want to keep eating stuff? Eating stuff is the best. Oh! And I can even find different ways of eating things, like making food-making stomachs and stuff by eating living things! That is infinite food right there. Doesn't sound boring at all," Sandy once more answered without hesitation.

"Now! Why are you the only one asking me questions? So, why are you called the Boundless Hydra? Did you use to be bound or something?" Sandy asked.

"My Path was similar to yours, and in my pursuit of power, I expanded every part of myself and grew. We Hydras tend to be more powerful the more heads we have, and my goal was to reach the apex. Turns out the apex is realizing there is no limit, only one's abilities holding one back," the Lord Protector answered truthfully.

"Cool! I am fine with only one head, though," Sandy made clear.

"I would assume as much. But we do share the Path of consumption, even if there are differences. Nevertheless, my Records do compliment yours. So, finally... would you, Sandy, the Cosmic Genesis Worm, have the honor of becoming my Chosen?" the Lord Protector asked the C-grade worm.

"Chosen... oh! Like Jake and his friend Villy!? Yeah, we can totally be friends if you want to! You seem like an okay Hydra."

“Friends... yes, you can view it as that,” the Lord Protector chose not to argue. *“With it will come responsibility and power. It will allow you to go further, but should you fall, it will, in turn, harm me. It is both a responsibility and a privilege. You will come to possess an Identity that will be recognized in the wider multiverse too. It is truly no decision to make lightly,”* the Hydra made very clear.

“Sounds like a lot of things just for becoming your friend, but I guess all that stuff is fine. Though, actually, can you explain it all a bit better? Jake did also mention that only idiots don’t properly take their time to understand an agreement before accepting it. That is how you get scammed, and I am not here to get scammed. So! Details, please?” Sandy did ask, showing a bit of doubt for the first time.

“Gladly,” the Hydra answered in a pleased tone.

Jake felt damn weird; no two ways about it. He felt his body flooded with the two presences as Sandy’s body had gone entirely limp. He instinctively knew their soul had been projected elsewhere, probably into the realm of Snappy.

Considering Jake was unable to move or do anything, he just had to ask Villy how things were doing.

“So, are those two having a nice chat?” Jake asked the snake god.

“That is between them, and not even I can forcefully listen in. Sure, Snappy would just allow me to, but I won’t,” Villy answered. *“But I will share a bit. You are probably wondering why Snappy is suddenly here talking about giving away a True Blessing. Snappy has not given out his True Blessing for many Eras by now; he has barely given any Blessings out, in fact. Firstly it is not really part of his Path, and secondly, there is risk and responsibility tied to having blessed ones out there. Snappy has been cooped up in the Order ever since I went into seclusion, and I believe it’s high time he begins to get a bit more out there.”*

“Doesn’t exactly explain why you want him to give out a True Blessing, especially not why Sandy would be a good candidate. Like, I see it kind of, but have you not talked repeatedly about how giving a True Blessing is a huge commitment?” Jake asked.

“It is, which is why I am not the one deciding if he chooses to bless the worm, and he may just decide on only giving a lower-level Blessing. What I did suggest to him was that maybe the worm was worth gambling on. So yes, it is a massive gamble, but one I think is worth taking for him. Plus, it will give him a stronger connection to the outside world,” Villy explained.

“I guess,” Jake semi-agreed.

He had to admit it, but... Sandy was not exactly the kind of being Jake thought of when someone mentioned a Chosen. Not that he was, either.

“Think positively, with any Blessing from Snappy, that worm will gain a huge boon,” Villy said. “Okay, finally, I will admit that I want to see what exactly a Cosmic Genesis Worm can turn into as it grows in power. It is an interesting beast and one I think can be useful to you for a long time if it can keep up with you. A True Blessing from someone like Snappy will help with that tremendously. More than that, the guidance of the Boundless Hydra would prove invaluable.”

“As long as Sandy also wants it,” Jake said.

“Jake, you are the only one I know that cannot renounce a Blessing, and also the only one I know who would not instantly jump at the opportunity of a True Blessing. Anyway, the worm can just choose to throw it away if it turns out to be something they don’t want,” Villy reminded him. “The bond between a Chosen and their god is not one of equals but is closer to that than any other Blessing.”

The two of them didn’t get much more time to speak before Jake felt a change. The presence of Snappy intensified to an entirely new level, forcing Jake to metaphorically grit his teeth. It was as if his insides were burning, and the epicenter of this presence was Sandy.

Seconds passed before it subsided, and Jake felt Villy and Snappy both retract their auras as Villy spoke in a joking tone. *“All hail Sandy, Chosen of the Boundless Hydra, the Devourer of Dimensions.”*

Jake did not pay it mind but instead focused on Sandy. The first thing he noticed was how the worm’s aura had changed. Grown. Not by a small margin either, but significant growth. Jake knew this had to be the titles added by being blessed, along with the bonuses of the Blessing itself.

“So... Sandy, how are you feeling?” Jake asked the worm.

“Huh? Oh, hey there, Jake! That was so wild but also kind of fun. I made a new friend with the super big Hydra guy, and we agreed that I would get Blessed by him and stuff, so now I am a Chosen too! Isn’t that cool?” Sandy asked with glee.

“Moreover! I am faster and even more durable now! I got boosts in all stats, and my tummy ache is entirely gone after that. Definitely a nice Hydra.”

Jake felt genuinely happy for his wormy friend but had one burning question in his mind.

“You also got a skill, right?”

“Yep!”

“Great. If you don’t mind me asking, what rarity is it? And could you tell me what it does, at least for me to get an idea?” Jake asked. He knew it was a lot to ask, but he was

damn curious. Jake had a strong feeling there existed a rarity beyond mythical but below divine, and he wasn't sure if Sandy would get a Divine skill as Snappy was no Primordial.

"The skill is divine, and as for what it does..." Sandy said, really dragging it out for dramatic purposes.

"Yes?" Jake asked, prompting the worm.

"It does so that..."

Jake felt like smashing something.

"...I can not tell you what it does!" Sandy said in a loud and cheerful tone.

"What?" Jake asked.

"Yep, my new friend told me not to tell anyone. So, sorry. Your fault for telling me that friends have to keep promises," Sandy said, still annoyingly cheerful.

It was not a discussion Jake wanted to take up as there was no winning. Instead, he would focus on moving forward. Or, well, upwards.

"Well, anyway, that was a nice little intermission to our journey," Jake said, changing the topic entirely. *"Are you ready to truly go and explore what resides in the upper layers of our planet's sky and hopefully allow us to travel together for a bit longer?"*

"Yeah, that was definitely a fun time," Sandy agreed. *"And also, yeah, let's go! Oh, but one thing first."*

Sandy spat Jake out as he appeared a bit confused in the real world. Sandy then seemed to focus before spitting out a small sphere that looked like a mix between stone and metal, giving off odd energy. It was about the size of Jake himself, and he could only stare at it with bewilderment. Especially as it contained Sandy's presence, meaning it was part of the worm.

"Can you keep that with you? It can go in your spatial storage," Sandy asked.

"What is it?" Jake asked.

"I made a promise not to tell, but I need you to keep it safe, and it will be super useful even when I can't follow, okay?"

Jake stared at the stone and shook his head as he stored the item that was clearly a product of the newly gained divine rarity skill.

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Chapter 549: Strategizing

Vilastromoz grinned as he waited for Snappy to return. Genuinely, he hadn't been sure if Snappy would actually give his True Blessing to the worm. He had gone with the tried and tested strategy of starting with the most extreme example of a Blessing while only expecting a Divine Blessing. A Greater Blessing also wouldn't have been that off from his expectations.

He would lie if he said it didn't please him. Then again, Snappy was better at judging the abilities of the Cosmic Genesis Worm than the Viper was. As mentioned, then while they both walked Paths where consumption was a big part of it, Snappy walked one where eating things was the primary element. If Villy was a master, then Snappy was a grand master.

As expected, Snappy returned soon after handing out the Blessing, looking a bit worse for wear. Giving out a True Blessing was never easy, and it quite literally ate your Records when you did it. If giving out a normal Blessing – even a Divine one – could be said to consume a limited resource pool, then giving away a True Blessing was giving away a portion of your maximum energy pool with the hope that the one you gave the pool to would improve the maximum. That, or die too early, making you permanently lose a portion of this pool that you would then have to make up for. Losing a single Chosen prematurely was a significant loss, even if it wouldn't necessarily result in any loss of combat prowess.

What it would do in every case was limit the potential of a god and make it harder for them to progress. In the same way, then if the Chosen did well, it would also help the god. Records mixed, too, giving other benefits. While Jake enjoyed plenty of the Viper's Records, then Vilastromoz too enjoyed the Records of Jake's achievements. The exchange was not equal but heavily favored for the Chosen, at least in the lower grades. What an S-grade did simply resulted in more meaningful Records for a god than nearly anything a D or even C-grade could possibly achieve.

This was why most gods waited to A or S-grade to make someone a Chosen. The chance of the person dying then was just lower, and one would nearly always get their investment returned. Especially as many gods hoped for the ultimate bounty of their Chosen reaching godhood, resulting in not only a huge return on investment but a new loyal god joining them in their factions.

However... the gains from someone you blessed even earlier on their Path reaching these levels of power were nothing compared to what the Viper would get from Jake. While the Viper had made Jake his Chosen rather impulsively, it wasn't as if he had done so without any thought.

"Had an enlightening conversation with the Cosmic Genesis Worm?" Vilastromoz asked Snappy.

"Moreso than expected," Snappy answered. "I must admit, I had not expected the level of presence resistance to be that high. It went above and beyond anything I have seen of any C-grade before. A result of your Chosen, I believe?"

"Yep," Vilastromoz confirmed. "This is that Sylphian Hawk all over again, though slightly less potent as far as I can tell."

"Sandy was still affected," Snappy agreed. "Just able to ignore it far better. Stoic is not the word I would use, but perhaps willfully ignorant is more accurate."

Vilastromoz nodded, having his thoughts reaffirmed. "So, what made you decide to give the True Blessing?"

Snappy was silent for a moment. "No singular factor was behind it. However, I had feared that Sandy would have been bound to your Chosen too tightly and not have enough independence. It was good to have it confirmed that is not the case. Moreover, as the Cosmic Genesis Worm was in my realm, I could feel its conceptual level of digestion and analyze how their inner world works."

"And?"

"I found it acceptable to make Sandy my Chosen," Snappy simply said with a smile. "The worm also had an acceptable personality and demeanor."

Vilastromoz also smiled and shook his head. "Keep your secrets, then. Though I must add, I am surprised Sandy could get the divine skill you chose to give. As far as I know, the compability requirements are through the roof on that one."

Snappy sighed. "How do you already know?"

Villy just kept smiling as he kept an eye on Jake and the worm. "Happy thoughts. At least you don't have to be that worried about Sandy dying to any unforeseen circumstances now."

When Jake thought about it, he had never actually gone that far into the sky. The furthest he had gone was with Hawkie while exploring the cloud continent, and that had still been in the lower layers of the world above. He had, for a long time, theorized one could find many powerful things up there, and that theory was soon proven true.

Earth had several layers of clouds, and entering each layer was like entering an entirely new world. Clouds above and below made it look like one was within a cave of clouds in the sky, and as Jake and Sandy entered one of the extremely far-up layers, Sandy suddenly stopped to shudder.

"This place is good," the worm said.

"Really?" Jake asked rhetorically with delight. *"That is great! Now see if you can move to the side too. Towards the west, that is."*

They still needed to make sure Sandy could actually enter the airspace above where the Fallen King was before they could call this a success.

However, Jake had a strong feeling it would be fine. This feeling primarily stemmed from the many beasts already in the area to the west, and far in the distance, Jake saw something extremely large move. So large it had to be C-grade.

As he had hoped, Sandy encountered no more problems but made it clear that going downward through any of the cloud layers was not an option. Jake asked Sandy to spit him out, and the worm did so.

Standing in the air outside, Jake stared downwards.

They were approximately two hundred kilometers from the surface of the planet. The cloud continent had been around twenty-five kilometers from the surface, so he was now around eight times higher, which made sense considering the presence of C-grades there.

"I guess we will have to say goodbye too... I can't follow you down from here," Sandy said with some sadness.

"Wait a bit," Jake said as he kept looking down and focusing.

He squinted his eyes and strained himself. Faint traces of stamina entered his eyes to empower them. In his vision, the layers of clouds thinned, turning into only a faint mist. Focusing more, the mist began dispersing as layer after layer disappeared, and a mountain valley entered his eyes.

And people laughed at full Perception builds, Jake smiled to himself. Okay, no one had really laughed about his stat build to his face, but plenty of people probably wanted to!

Looking around, Jake soon spotted what he was looking for. A mountain peak with gold on top – the residence of the Fallen King. It was a bit far off to the side, though, but he had time to get in position. Nothing was going on all the way below as far as he could see, meaning no fight was happening.

“What are you looking at?” Sandy finally asked.

“The mountains below to figure out the best spot to prepare,” Jake answered.

“You can see all the way down there?” Sandy asked with confusion. “That is like super far, isn’t it? And isn’t all the stuff in the way annoying?”

“It is, but I can handle it. I also think I may have to go a bit lower while I prepare as I don’t want any C-grades to interrupt me,” Jake answered.

“So it is goodbye...” Sandy said with sadness. “Oh well, I guess nothing can be done about that.”

Jake frowned a bit as the last part sounded far less sad than the first. It took him a moment, but he got it. *“You detected something tasty?”*

“Maaaybe? The sky is way better than the water, that is for damn sure,” Sandy said cheerfully. “But do say hi again when you are done dealing with human stuff, okay? Just take the egg- I mean, rock-thing, I gave you earlier and infuse some energy into it, and I will come if I can.”

Jake smiled as he patted his wormy friend. *“I will. See you around, Sandy, and happy hunting. Treasure hunting, that is.”*

“You too! Good luck killing stuff and all that, and I hope that weird stuff you prepared works. Unique Lifeforms sound scary,” Sandy also said their goodbyes.

With those words, Sandy left to do wormy adventures of their own. Jake would lie if he said he wouldn’t miss the giant gluttonous worm, but such was life. At least he now had a method of contact, and even if he didn’t, then he could at least contact his fellow Chosen through Villy.

Yes, it still felt weird that Sandy was now a Chosen of an extremely powerful god and that there was absolutely no change in the worm despite that. Not that he complained, as he preferred it that way. He did wonder what that entire egg business was about, as that wasn’t something Sandy could do before, meaning it definitely came from the skill granted by the True Blessing.

This meant the egg had to come from a divine skill, even if it felt rather mundane. Villy had said that no combat-oriented skills could be given, but that didn’t mean Jake had any idea what the worm had gotten. *I guess I will find out at some point. For now, let’s focus on the task at hand.* The source of this content is novel•fire•net

Jake dove downwards for a good while until reaching around the hundred-kilometer mark. He timed himself and estimated he would be able to reach the ground in around

two minutes if he went at full speed. This put his speed somewhere around two and three times the speed of sound, closer to three.

Taking some more notes, Jake scoured the mountain range below, waiting for something to happen. As he did this, he also took out a token and activated it. A minute passed before he felt Miranda make contact.

Miranda had activated the ritual circle to establish a connection with Jake, and it formed effortlessly.

"I am in position around a hundred kilometers above the mountain range now. I have visual contact with where the King resides," Jake said, surprising Miranda a bit. Not only with how fast he had gotten there, but that he was so far up in the sky.

"Is that within feasible striking distance?" Miranda asked with doubt.

"Yes," Jake simply answered.

She did not even try to argue it. Jake knew far better than she did when it came to these kinds of things. *"Very well, I will now form the three-way connection. Wait a minute."*

Miranda quickly took out a few more items that she placed on the circle. Pouring her mana in and controlling the ritual, a second connection was formed. Focusing, Miranda took these connections and channeled them first through herself and then into the circle as he connected them all with herself as the central medium.

"It has been a while since we last spoke, little hunter," a voice spoke to not only Miranda but everyone else part of the ritual. Jake being everyone else in this case.

"That it has," Jake agreed. *"I hear you have been struggling with some ash guy or something? Do you mean to tell me that this other Unique Lifeform is superior to you?"*

"Superior is a strong word to describe a creature of equal class. That neither of us can kill the other is only a testament to the power of Unique Lifeforms," the King scoffed.

"Sure, a testament to their power. I guess to take down such a powerful foe, you need an expert in killing Unique Lifeforms. I guess I can consult, considering my vast experience on the subject?" Jake teased.

"I must disappoint you; I sadly do not have several system-granted items to make this Unique Lifeform weak enough for you to stand a chance."

"Too bad, guess we will have to just kill it the old-fashioned way then, huh? Oh wait, you also tried that and failed? Damn," Jake said.

“Boys, be nice to each other,” Miranda finally cut in to mediate the two bickering... eh... peak powerhouses of Earth? The peak of D-grade, at least. Anyway.

“Jake is in position now in the air far above the mountain range. Am I correct to assume that both of you are ready to engage the next time the Unique Lifeform shows up?” Miranda asked.

“Yes,” the King answered.

“I would prefer to wait until the time after that. You say it comes by often... make it so that this time is shorter than the others. Make it believe you are truly struggling and soon unable to keep up. You already said you are slowly losing out; make it believe you are truly at your limit. Then make it retreat, fully heal up, and return for the killing blow,” Jake said without a hint of teasing, surprising Miranda a bit at his patience. She had assumed he wanted to rush in.

“Why the delay?” the King asked, no longer joking around either.

“For me to properly assess the Unique Lifeform and make use of some of my skills. Will it be a problem to do this?” Jake asked. This was no jab but a genuine inquiry.

“Yes, it should be feasible. I have been facing mounting pressure recently, and I can play it up,” the King answered.

“Alright,” Miranda agreed. *“Allow me to contact and bring in the final member of this little plan.”*

Miranda had already prepared as the two spoke and activated yet another token. She repeated the process from before and had to sacrifice quite the energy to facilitate what was essentially a group call. The old man she wanted to bring in had been waiting and nearly instantly reacted.

“Greetings, Ms. Wells, Jake, and... the Fallen King, is it?” the Sword Saint spoke as he too took part in their little strategy meeting.

“Well met, swordsman,” the King greeted.

“Hi there,” Jake also said hello.

“I am glad you could join us,” Miranda finished. Channeling the presences of four people in a ritual like this wasn't easy, especially not considering the distance between some of them and her having to make sure the connection was secure.

“I take it the time is approaching?” the Sword Saint asked.

“Yes, we are soon ready and want to make sure you are in position and able to engage when called upon,” Miranda asked the Sword Saint.

“You need not worry; I am ready. Simply say when,” the Sword Saint confirmed.

“Great. Jake, if you would explain your plan of engagement to the others?” Miranda asked.

“Okay, so I thought that-“

Jake went on to explain as Miranda just listened in and focused on the ritual. The King asked a few questions as he was the only other one directly involved in the fight with the other Unique Lifeform, with the Sword Saint more there to offer advice. Jake also gave the Sword Saint some tips as they all knew the old man would have potentially the most dangerous job of all:

Keeping Ell'Hakan busy during the takedown of the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

It took in total about half an hour to go over everything, and by then, Miranda was also plenty tired. They said their goodbyes, and, with relief, she disengaged from the ritual and let it fade. Not having the energy to clean the circle then and there, she went to relax in another room and found a certain snake sitting by the door.

“It went well?” the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake asked.

“As expected,” Miranda just answered. “What about you? Have you decided on a name yet?”

“No... it is too hard. But I thought, what if we combine them?”

Miranda was a bit surprised, but after thinking about it, it wasn't a bad idea. Allie Scarlett or Scarlett Allie. Maybe make it Allison, or-

“How about Scallie to-“

Miranda instantly raised her hand, making the snake shut up. “Back to the drawing board on that one.”

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Chapter 550: Assessment & Preparation

Jake spent the next day or so refining and making more of the poison that he would use to take down the Unique Lifeform as he waited for it to appear below. It took about twenty-six hours before Jake spotted the Ashen Phantom Devourer move roughly a hundred kilometers below himself.

Its form was truly massive, and to Jake, it looked like the sandstorm he had seen in the desert but made of ash and not sand. Without knowing better, he would not even have thought it a living creature. Black ash simply swept across the mountains as if a strong wind carried it. As it approached the residence of the Fallen King, the ash began to condense itself into a vaguely humanoid form a bit more than five meters tall.

The figure raised a long log-like arm as space seemed to distort. A giant bullet of ash was collected that was fired out of the domain and towards the residence of the King. The King responded as a barrier appeared, and the Unique Lifeform emerged.

Ash can leave the area, forcing it to generate more, Jake quickly concluded as more ash just seemed to appear within the domain. Focusing, he tried to look deeper and get a feeling for what he was facing. His high Perception had already allowed him to look past the clouds that blocked out his vision, but now he wanted to see something not visible to the naked eye.

The domain of the Unique Lifeform was its Soulshape, which meant it had to leave something there. Some part of itself, at least in the metaphysical realm. Usually, Jake saw the Soulshape of a creature by relying on the poison running through their bodies and using Sense of the Malefic Viper. However, in this case, he could not feasibly poison the Unique Lifeform to do this without it discovering his presence.

According to him, the King could see the full body of the Ashen Phantom Devourer. His sight was not the same as that of a human's but far more magical in nature, and Sandy could likely also have sensed the body of the Unique Lifeform. The environment it occupied simply had to be different in some way, even if it was not currently within his visible spectrum.

The human eye had limitations. Examples were such as how it could not see infrared or ultraviolet light and overall had a relatively narrow spectrum of wavelength visible to it. Probably a good thing, too, as being able to see outside of it would be a miserable experience considering all the wavelengths in the air at all times stemming from phone signals, radio waves, the internet, and whatnot. Yet humans had found ways to still see these things. Measure them using devices to translate them into something humans could see and understand.

Jake had none of such measurement devices, and post-system, they likely wouldn't even work either. What he did have was a superhuman body and Perception above anything a D-grade human should ever have. He could see mana of different affinities, use tracking to detect things that weren't truly there, and even adapt and get used to these things, such as when he got used to dark mana. So why should he not be able to

also see outside of the visual spectrum of humans and see the metaphysical? Gaze of the Apex Hunter already allowed him to “see” his opponent’s soul based on the description, and that skill had permanently modified his eyes to allow this. Shit, at times, he felt like he had seen someone’s soul, such as when he tried to get around Identify protection.

At this point, it was no longer just a theory that he could do it but a conviction that he simply hadn’t found the proper method.

The battle below continued as the two powerful entities crashed repeatedly. The Fallen King purposefully played it defensively and blocked most attacks with his powerful telekinesis while allowing the weaker blows to merely fizzle out upon encountering his barrier.

Ash formed into different shapes appeared to be the primary method of attack deployed by the Ashen Phantom Devourer, but Jake quickly saw it wasn’t that simple. The ash was not simply compressed but layered in odd ways. A single spear of ash looked like it was made of obsidian, making it far more condensed than what made sense. To add on, the ash could also change shape even when in flight, and rather than fly straight, it often seemed to teleport.

Because it did teleport.

Another thing the King had already mentioned was the ash’s ability to not only do damage but multiply by itself. Jake was not entirely certain what affinities ash existed of, but he assumed it had to do with fire of some kind. Now that he observed it in action, he became more and more certain of one thing that also made the Phantom part of the Unique Lifeform’s name make sense.

Dark mana. The ash is heavily infused with dark mana, Jake concluded. The dark mana materialized as the ash consumed the mana of the King whenever they clashed, and a reason why ash constantly filled the huge domain was due to the Unique Lifeform absorbing energy from outside into its territory at all times.

Every particle of ash also had dark mana within, absorbing some of the King’s simply by passively touching his barrier. This dark mana appeared weaker than its space and ash magic and pretty much only included the assimilation parts of the dark affinity. From Jake’s initial assessment, the King was superior in both power and resources, but the Devourer won out in durability and endurance.

Not that either of them wasn’t considered pinnacle creatures, even in their weak areas.

The more Jake understood his opponent, the more he knew what he was looking for. Focusing, he began to see an outline. Following that path, the outline turned entirely black as huge parts of the mountain range suddenly got covered in complete darkness.

It was... massive. Jake knew this was the true body of the Unique Lifeform, and he now also knew he had severely underestimated the size of his foe. It truly was nearly as large as the C-grade whale had been, but he also saw something different. Its size shrank whenever it launched attacks to then grow in between attacking or defending.

Size represented by resources remaining, Jake then also concluded.

The entire domain could also naturally move. The King retreated out of it several times, and that was when Jake noted down one more crucial aspect. It moved using physical ash. In order to move the domain, the ash had to "push" the perimeter of the domain by flying in the direction the Unique Lifeform wanted to go, meaning that a physical barrier would obstruct it. Jake breathed out a sigh of relief upon realizing this as that ruled out the Unique Lifeform fleeing below the ground by simply moving its domain downward.

Jake kept refining his vision as the dark blob began to become more transparent. He then began to see that light also refracted here and there within the domain whenever space magic was deployed, and more ash appeared.

Golden light and waves of pure force met ash as the two Unique Lifeforms fought, leaving the entire area broken and destroyed - even more than it already was. The King's golden attacks seemed to do significant damage to the Ashen Phantom Devourer whenever ash was destroyed, and sometimes the entire domain seemed to move in order to try and avoid attacks. However, more often, the other Unique Lifeform moved to block. At nearly all times, it also kept a figure condensed somewhere, and Jake also realized the reason for this.

It needs a focal point of energy. Like a catalyst at the center of a ritual circle, condensing a body allows it to focus its energy into a single entity to then further condense and launch attacks.

Another potential weakness. Destroying this condensed body would do more damage than striking anywhere else, as it contained more energy than anywhere else. If the Unique Lifeform had been C-grade, it could likely have made far more of these forms or perhaps not had to at all, but as things were, this was a limitation in its abilities.

The entire battle between the Unique Lifeforms ended up taking around an hour. After an hour, the King began to launch larger and larger attacks, damaging the Devourer more and more. Yet it also left him open, and the Devourer struck and tore off some of his natural bark-like armor and smashed the King back several times.

Yet just as the King looked like he was about to unleash some final attack, the Ashen Phantom Devourer simply retreated. The domain moved away the same way it had come, and Jake stared after it as he saw it reach a large hole in the ground more than fifty kilometers from the King. When it reached the hole, the entire domain shrank and entered. The domain was only about sixty to seventy percent of its regular size at that point, too, visualizing the damage it had taken. It had clearly gone to absorb more

energy again and return at full power, while Jake could see the King had taken far more damage and would need longer to heal.

A good strategy if you are not in a rush and play it safe... to bad it read the situation wrong.

Jake took out his token again, and as he saw the King retreat to his residence, the connection was formed.

"Hey Miranda, that was fast. So, how you holding up down there?" Jake asked the King

"As predicted. The Ashen Phantom Devourer should estimate that I am at about half resources now, and by the time it fully recovers, I would barely be able to reach around sixty to sixty-five percent. I used my boosting skill liberally this time around to appear more desperate too. In reality, I can consume a few Soul Marbles, and I should be back to over eighty percent. Before you ask, potions do not help; besides, potions barely work on Unique Lifeforms. My guess is that the Devourer shall return within the next twelve hours in an attempt to finish me off. In fact, I think it wanted this battle to be the last but decided to retreat to fully secure the kill without being harmed too much itself."

Jake nodded. *"Twelve hours is plenty enough time. Miranda, be ready to inform the Sword Saint. I will eat my bow if that orange bastard doesn't have some method of coming to help fast, so we need the old man on his toes."*

"Of course," Miranda agreed. *"I will leave you to your preparations now. Neil has also prepared, and if everything goes as hoped, we should be able to also return to Haven promptly."*

Jake once again nodded. *"I have a good feel for what this Ashen Phantom Devourer can do now, and I believe it will be in for quite the surprise. You have confidence in fulfilling your part even with your injuries?"*

The last part was naturally asked of the King.

"More than ready," the King responded confidently.

"Very well. See you when the Ashen Phantom Devourer arrives. I will prick your soul when I engage. Jake, over and out."

With that, the conversation ended, and nothing more needed to be said. All that was needed now was execution, and Jake had twelve hours to make sure everything was perfect. Luckily, he had already done most of these preparations by creating the one crucial factor to make their strategy work:

A working neurotoxin.

Due to the lack of time, Jake had not held back when it came to using ingredients. Jake had sought deep and taken out everything he had stored and bought from all around. He had experimented a lot and found one ingredient that mixed incredibly well with the kind of toxin he wanted to make. It was an old gift from his little brother.

[Umbral Lotus Leaf (Ancient)] – The leaf of a legendary rarity Umbral Lotus. This leaf is incredibly poisonous and releases dark-affinity mana all around it. Consuming it may lead to adverse effects. Many alchemical uses and creations will have neurotoxin and perception-limiting effects.

Jake had kind of forgotten he even had the lotus leaves. As he didn't have enough of them to actually experiment, Jake had one in Palate since the day he began working on the neurotoxin and instead used lesser dark mana poisons. His control of dark mana proved invaluable during this process and allowed him to get better far faster than expected.

The second ingredient was naturally the Lifeblood.

[Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin (Ancient)] – The Lifeblood of a slain Emperor Urchin, an incredibly poisonous creature only found in areas with extremely dense water affinity. Its very blood is toxic to consume and especially toxic if directly injected. The Lifeblood is of a neurotoxin nature. Has many alchemical uses and is especially potent when combined with other neurotoxins or poisons with the water affinity.

Then, for a third ingredient, he also pulled out something he hadn't really ever made use of. A reward from the entrance-exam dungeon of the Academy in the Order.

[Refined Manticore Stinger (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.

Jake had carried it around with him for a long time, producing plenty of venom passively during this time. He had found that only natural passive mana seemed to work with it, meaning Jake could not infuse it himself... but Sandy could. So, Sandy had been nice enough to dedicate a stomach to storing the stinger and constantly infusing it with energy to pump out more and more venom.

The petrification effect was good at adding a certain rigidity to the neurotoxin. He did not need the petrification effect, but just making it a bit harder to move was more than fine. Just as he ended up refining away the water affinity part of the Lifeblood, so did he remove most of the earth affinity of this one.

Finally, to finish off the concoction, Jake naturally added his blood as well as some good old moss. Moss was always good in these kinds of concoctions.

It had taken many days of experimenting and many failed products. Jake did make several neurotoxins, but every time he made one, he ran into the same issue of how to deliver it properly. Making a poison that had to contact the ash itself was not feasible based on what the King had told him during his preparation phase, so Jake had gone in a direction where it simply needed to touch the Soulshape.

This meant Jake sacrificed a lot of potency for easier delivery. He also sacrificed a lot of other aspects of the poison. It did not need to deal damage; it did not need to even be particularly potent... it just had to work and be hard to deal with in a short amount of time.

Making a poison like this in only a few weeks was not easy, but Jake luckily had enough good ingredients with him to waste. What he didn't have enough of, Sandy helped him find. Finally, three days before they arrived at the mountain range, he had made the first batch of poison.

[Soul-Petrifying Shadow Poison (Rare)] – A special poison created by combining several powerful ingredients with the singular goal of creating a potent neurotoxin able to affect the soul. This is a soul poison that will actively attempt to affect any Soulshape it touches due to its nature. Once infected will make the Soulshape more rigid, severely limiting all mobility. The dark energy makes all movements of energy more difficult for any affected target. This poison is incredibly difficult to cleanse and has a slight ability to self-replicate if not actively challenged, and it will strengthen itself the more poison is injected.

The poison looked good and had a long description, but quite frankly, it was atrocious. It was weak as hell, and Jake would prefer to use common rarity poison on his arrows over this new neurotoxin. Each dose was just so weak. However... it did its job. Because it had an element of scalability beyond any other poison he had ever made.

More importantly, it was relatively easy to make as long as he had all the ingredients. The rarity was only what it was due to the ingredients used, and the level of difficulty – or rather lack thereof – was also reflected in him having only gained two levels.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 191 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 192 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points**** This update is available on [novel•fire•net](http://novel.fire.net)

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 193 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

These levels included all the batches Jake had made. He only had three leaves, but luckily each leaf had enough energy for several batches of poison each. This meant Jake had managed to create a total of fourteen batches of the poison, resulting in seventy-one bottles. He had only failed a single concoction, and that had been his third-ever attempt, once more reflecting the easy crafting difficulty.

Compared to his Sleeping Night Toxin, this poison was shameful, and he would gladly forget he had ever made it once done... but for this fight, it should be enough. If he had more time, perhaps he could have made it better, but he didn't.

One good thing, though. After this fight, he wouldn't have any more of the poison because all of it was getting used today.

With twelve hours or so to the fight, Jake began preparing. He would show that while the two Unique Lifeforms could perhaps match or even beat him in a straight-on fight, the game changed when he had preparation time.

The Ashen Phantom Devourer was about to learn why messing with an alchemist, or worse, an alchemist-hunter, was what many would classify as a very bad time.

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