

The Primal Hunter

Chapter 551: Broken Sky

It was a fight that he knew they could not lose. One that could perhaps decide the fate of the planet he had now come to call home.

The King meditated as he healed himself as much as possible. He wished he was skilled in formations to set up a proper one to help him in his regeneration, but sadly that did not fall within his skill set. Having anyone else make such a magic circle also wouldn't prove very effective due to the uniqueness of a Unique Lifeform.

Consuming a Soul Marble, the King slowly absorbed it, and he felt his body fill with energy. He would take another one just as the Ashen Phantom Devourer attacked again, but that would also be his final one.

One might ask why the King stayed in a losing war for months. There truly was no logical explanation for this besides an unwillingness to retreat and abandon his claimed territory. He was a King, and an enemy had invaded his domain, so he had a natural urge to defend it. That he also knew the benefits he could gain from killing another Unique Lifeform also played a huge factor. Finally, he still had a good chance due to his ultimate move.

Hours passed by as he progressively felt better. He purposefully did not heal his natural armor fully but allowed cracks and missing pieces here and there to properly look like he had been unable to properly recover. One might also ask if using these underhanded tactics wasn't above a Unique Lifeform, but the King would find such a question utterly foolish. To purposefully give up an advantage and act with overconfidence was how he had found himself slain once already, and he had no desire to repeat that.

His prediction of twelve hours turned out to be slightly off as only nine and a half hours later, he felt the other Unique Lifeform approach. The Fallen King could only hope that the little hunter was ready despite the pushed-up timescale, and if not, the King would simply have to hold on a bit longer than expected.

The King teleported out of his residence and saw the approaching mass. A soul equally as powerful as his own approached, its size and power nearly fully recovered in such a short time span. The giant cloud of ash moved ever closer as the taunting words echoed.

“Yet you remain guarding your pathetic kingdom in your ignorance. Behold the result of your folly: death.”

It had almost become a ritual by now that the other Unique Lifeform would start by saying something taunting and slightly annoying. Not that the King had ever been bothered by such childish words. Like before, he simply engaged but made sure to hold himself back a bit this time around to appear weaker than he actually was.

The Ashen Phantom Devourer struck with full force right from the beginning. Evidently, the intent was to slay him as soon as possible and overwhelm him so that the King would use his trump cards while the Devourer was still close to full power.

Staying defensive was difficult even if the King knew he was just buying time, and he did launch the occasional attack to not be too suspicious. Luckily, the other Unique Lifeform could easily misunderstand his carefulness as doubt and weakness, making it appear less out-of-place than it actually was. For more chapters visit [novel·fire·net](http://novel.fire.net)

Massive waves of ash crashed against the telekinetically formed barriers of the King like the tide of the ocean crashing into a dam. With every second, they grew in power, and the King felt the constant eating away of his energy from the dark affinity of his foe.

Nevertheless, he was far from defenseless. Both his claws glowed golden as he tore the wave apart and unleashed several golden waves of pure force, breaking apart the body of the Devourer. It rapidly condensed a new one as a mountain of ash formed and crashed down towards the King. Hanging on with his barrier, he was sent down, smashing into the ground as hundreds of tons of ash fell upon his body.

With annoyance, the King raised two fingers and sent out two thin waves of force that he swiftly moved in a circle, cutting a hole in the ash. He barely got through before the hole closed, the King avoiding being crushed. Yet just as he was out of it, the King was struck by a blast of ash, sending him tumbling back. Sometimes the Devourer infused the ash with pure space energy, making it look like a transparent flame despite it simply being pure kinetic force infused into ash.

An annoying but highly effective attack.

About five minutes passed as they fought, the King getting forced back more and more. A vague sense of doubt began to enter the King's mind as he feared the little hunter was not ready. The King would have to pick up the pace himself and use his boosting skill prematurely if he was not soon ready. That could potentially throw off the plan.

Just when that doubt set in, he felt a weak attack on his soul from far above. It was the hunter's gaze that had briefly landed upon him and attacked.

Too weak to damage him or even affect him, but just strong enough for him to sense.

It was the agreed-upon signal, and the King did his part.

Activating his boosting skill, the King attacked with massive waves of force, making the Ashen Phantom Devourer defend. While it was still defending, the King spread his presence and focused all his power on restricting the domain.

He hoped that whatever the hunter had prepared would be enough to-

The King felt a shockwave. Both he and the other Unique Lifeform momentarily stopped as their senses sought the sky.

A sky that looked to have been shattered and fell as crystals in shades of purple.

The shade of the hunter's arcane affinity.

Perhaps this clash could be the last, the observer noted with hope. He had been stuck in the mountains for months now at the orders of the Celestial Child, and while he did have some complaints about his station, he did not complain. It was the will of heaven's child; who was he to argue? Besides, he knew he was the weakest of those who had been brought to this new planet.

He had looked at this battle play out so many times already, and he had noticed the shift. The first time the Ashen Phantom Devourer had lost pretty handily, enough for him to assume that perhaps this Fallen King was superior. However, as time went on, the momentum shifted, and the Devourer slowly began winning out. Once more, he, as a servant, could only admonish himself for questioning the actions of the Celestial Child.

This time around, the fight was indeed much more fierce as both seemed to go all out. Then, suddenly, the Fallen King seemed to stop. He pulled out immense amounts of power as he seemed to hold the Ashen Phantom Devourer still. *Is this perhaps his trump move?*

He got his answer at that very moment. As a servant, his skills were limited, but one thing he did excel in was Perception, and yet he had not noticed something had been brewing far up in the sky. When he saw it, he instantly recognized the energy signature.

The Malefic's Chosen.

The servant quickly took out a token and fulfilled his duty as he infused his message that the Chosen was there before crushing it. He took out another token in preparation to relay what was about to happen but suddenly felt a shift in space behind him.

He quickly turned and saw a figure had appeared only a kilometer or so behind him, having been teleported in.

Who!? Wait...

The figure rapidly made its way over as the servant spoke:

"What are you doing he-"

The words got stuck in his throat as nothing more than a hiss came out. He stared with wide eyes as strings wrapped around and neck, but surprisingly they didn't harm him. Why would they harm him, now that he thought about it? Why was he even...

His thoughts didn't go further as his mind slowly gave out, and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

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"It is time," the C-grade jellyfish spoke as William opened his eyes.

"Has he appeared?" William asked with a mix of anticipation and apprehension.

"Yes," the jellyfish answered without explaining further. William knew that he couldn't delay and had already spent many days steeling his resolve.

"Take me there," William said as a magic circle appeared on the platform in the cave. The metal mage promptly flew over and landed on it as the space magic around him warped everything. The teleportation was truly marvelous, and only a few seconds later, William found himself standing on a small cliff on the side of a mountain.

Instantly he felt the wave of pure power descending. He did not know who it was initially, but soon he realized.

Yet another thing also caught his eye. A nahoom was hiding not far from him, holding a token and also observing. William did not know why, but his first reaction was to charge the alien. The other party had already seen him, but before he could finish asking why William was there, strings had already wrapped around his neck.

William sent through a powerful pulse of pure karmic energy. He manipulated the man until he fell. Knocked out but still alive. Seeing the token that had fallen on the ground, William just shook his head. He knew he had just helped the monster... but it was necessary. William needed to confront him, and Ell'Hakan showing up would ruin that. Moreover, he would prefer for no one else to know he was there or what he was doing.

As for the fight between the Unique Lifeforms and the monster... William already knew it was not anything he should get involved in. Whatever the hell that monster had done was exactly the kind of thing one could expect, as the entire mountain range was bathed in a hue of purple.

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Approximately nine hours earlier.

Prep work for any large project was always hard work, but Jake had enjoyed his time doing it. Twelve hours to prepare wasn't a lot, but to Jake, that was eleven mana potions right there and a whole lot of mana. After his conversation with the King, he got to work.

Using Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows, Jake summoned a stable arrow and proceeded to take out a bottle of his sweet neurotoxin. He carefully soaked it in poison and, using stable arcane mana, covered the tip as he dripped a bit more poison onto it before covering it up, leaving a hollow tip with a bit of poison inside.

After that, he tossed the arrow in his quiver and summoned another, only to repeat the process. Hours passed as Jake kept making arrows and putting them in his quiver where they would remain effectively frozen in time. He did use his quiver to store poisoned arrows usually, but this was the most extreme case of him ever doing it. Frankly, the quiver was one of those things Jake barely thought about in his daily life but was actually incredibly valuable to him.

[Quiver of Perrinality (Legendary)] – A quiver created from the leather of a powerful B-grade beast with the ability to create minor subdimensions within its skin where it stores different natural treasures to use as weapons. Made into a quiver, it now retains those same effects. Allows the wearer to infuse mana into the quiver to conjure arrows. Allows the wearer to store conjured creations classified as arrows within the quiver without experiencing any energy decay for an extended period of time. The inside of the quiver is spatially expanded, allowing the wearer to store arrows of varying sizes. The wearer will have innate control of the inside of the quiver when bound. Enchantments: Perrinial Quiver.

Requirements: lvl 135+ in any humanoid race.

He was glad that the arrows stayed classified as weapons even after he modified them slightly with a toxic payload. Jake had made sure that he didn't break integral parts of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows skill either because he would need a function of that skill later.

A hundred arrows were soon stored. Then two hundred. Three hundred. The bottles of poison emptied one by one, as Jake had to consume a mana potion here and there as he began the second aspect of the project. Inside the quiver, an arrow began to appear as Jake closed his eyes and focused.

It was entirely purple but had green threads running through it. Its size was incomparable to anything Jake had ever made before, and he was happy to see that his willpower did slightly help him also affect the shape. It was naturally an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, and the one he was summoning was incredibly thin for its size and close to five meters long. His time observing the Unique Lifeform had been primarily to make this exact arrow.

Once it was fully summoned, Jake began the third part. In the real world, Jake began weaving a net of mana strings and wrapping it up tight in preparation. He could sadly not do it in the quiver, so this had to be enough.

Hours kept ticking by as Jake was ready after the seventh. He knew there was a chance the Unique Lifeform would come earlier, and his guts told him he wouldn't have the full twelve hours. He trusted himself as always and went with seven to prepare in order to be safe.

Jake then spent the next hour summoning stable arcane bolts. During this time, Jake had never been topped up with mana and consumed a mana potion every time he could, primarily to ensure he was always close to full in case the fighting began.

Soon, Jake spotted the Ashen Phantom Devourer emerge from its underground hunt. Jake did not hesitate for a moment. Arcane Awakening activated at its full 60%, and he unleashed Pride of the Malefic Viper to better control his mana.

Hundreds upon hundreds of arrows were taken out of the quiver as he threw them out. Using Pride, he froze them all and made them levitate as he finally reached the final arrow. The massive Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter emerged, and Jake's many magic strings instantly sought towards it and wrapped around it. These strings then flew out from the large arrow and wrapped themselves around the hundreds of smaller arrows.

His head was pounding, and his body was overflowing with mana as he finished his massive tapestry of arrows. In the sky hung a vast spiderweb of interlinked arrows with stable arcane bolts also mixed in here and there. As a final thing, Jake infused stability into all of the strings to make sure they didn't break.

Taking a deep breath, Jake finally took out his bow and nocked the massive Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter that all of the other arrows were attached to. He began charging Arcane Powershot as the energy flooded the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter but didn't harm any of the strings on it.

Today Jake also learned something else about Hunting Momentum. While it did build up when he observed a target and stalked it, that charging was usually incredibly slow. But preparing to strike like this? It had been building far more than expected, and while it was far from maxed out, it was an added bonus he would in no way say no to as he infused it all into the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

Go.

The strike contained everything he had, and the opponent wasn't even aware it was coming, making Stealth Attack also further amplifying the power of the strike. Jake released the string as an explosion rocked the sky. The clouds parted all around him as the massive arrow began descending, dragging along with it over four hundred other arrows and well-over a thousand arcane bolts.

It did not stop there. Jake unhesitantly began flying downwards, chasing his arrows.

Nothing could stop the attack and a few unlucky creatures that got in the way died simply by being too close to the descending strike. Jake kept pushing himself as the arrow naturally flew far faster than he, and soon enough, it exited the final layer of clouds just above the Ashen Phantom Devourer's domain.

Jake gritted his teeth and strained himself more than ever before. Blood began pouring out his nose and his head felt like it was about to explode. Yet he grinned as he knew he could do it. He felt the connection to every single arrow, all four hundred and eleven of them, as he used every shred of his willpower to use the skill, even using Words of Power.

“Splitting Arrow Rain.”

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Chapter 552: Unique Trump Cards

One became ten.

Each arrow split ten times each, making what would only have been light rain into a storm flood. Each arrow was still purely stable arcane mana as it fell. The Ashen Phantom Devourer reacted quickly as it tried to move away, but the King strained himself to contain the Unique Lifeform.

Not that he had to constrain it for long, as the arrows hit less than a second after becoming visible. The Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter hit the domain and instantly just disappeared as it sank into the Soulshape of the Unique Lifeform. This left the more than four thousand arrows and the many stable arcane bolts to just fall into the domain.

Jake, with blood running from his nose and a toothy grin, acted. The connection with the arrows had never been lost, and it took nothing more than a mental command. Every single arrow crackled with instability as, in an instant, they shifted from pure stability to pure destruction.

And then everything exploded.

From up in the air, Jake saw the entire world flash purple. Even with his high Perception, it took him a second to see again, and what was revealed could only be

described as a cataclysm. What had once been a mountain range was now still kind of a mountain range, but with a massive crater in the middle.

However, Jake had no time or attention to spare on observing the environment. He had known that even if this attack went above and beyond his expectations, it would not be enough to kill a peak D-grade Unique Lifeform. And he had been right.

All the ash had been destroyed, but the domain remained. The King had managed to shield himself as he was not the primary target and did not hesitate to engage as the domain stirred. Ash began appearing as a figure assembled itself. The source of this content is *novel*✕fire✕*net*

Jake pulled out his bow while flying down and released another barrage of arrows. A wall of ash appeared and blocked them all, but this left an opening as a golden wave cut across the domain and destroyed the assembled being of ash.

Another one appeared, but there was no time to rest. The domain had shrunk by nearly forty percent from that one opening attack, and as Jake released his second attack, the barrier did not manage to be assembled in time. It instead was conjured just after the arrows passed, allowing arcane explosions to destroy even more of the ash.

The neurotoxin was beginning to really kick in. Jake was also certain that every bit of ash now had an even higher cost to being summoned. The Unique Lifeform had also naturally noticed the poison and began eliminating it from its soul.

Oh no, you don't!

Touch of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake controlled the poison from up in the air. The King also did his part as explosions rocked the domain and golden waves constantly ripped apart the creature. Soon, the Unique Lifeform tried to escape, but Jake slowed it down enough for the King to easily keep up.

Jake followed along as the domain ash moved across the vast mountain range, focusing solely on Touch of the Malefic Viper. With every second, the domain shrank by a little, and the King seemed to only increase the fervor with which he attacked.

After a minute or so of this, the Ashen Phantom Devourer seemed to realize it was actually in trouble. Big trouble.

“Pathetic to require the help of a mere human! An utter embarrassment to call yourself a Unique Lifeform! If you truly think this is enough to-”

“Funny,” the voice of the King echoed out as it interrupted the Devourer. *“You sound like me just before this very same human killed me.”*

The Unique Lifeform seemed shocked for a moment as Jake felt it stop fighting his poison for a fraction of a second. Yet it quickly collected itself as an odd calmness overtook its form. Jake felt the shift instantly, and a sense of danger appeared, telling him to stay the fuck away from the Devourer.

“I see.”

That was all the Ashen Phantom Devourer said as it stopped completely. The King kept attacking, but Jake rapidly threw him a look and used a weak Gaze to warn him. Just in time too.

Everything warped. Space itself shattered and distorted as the domain collapsed in on itself, releasing a massive wave of energy, sending Jake flying upwards and pushing back the King who had barely managed to get out of the domain.

Then, with the push came a pull. The entire Unique Lifeform was now nothing more than five meters across and looked like a miniature black sun... no. What could happen to a star after it collapsed.

At that moment, the Ashen Phantom Devourer had become what Jake could only describe as a black hole. And as a black hole, it sought to devour everything.

Space itself bent, light refracted, and the mountains surrounding them began cracking and collapsing in the distance. The ground below rose as Jake felt a pull on not only the physical realm but even in the metaphysical one.

Mana, affinities, everything was being pulled in. Jake had to resist it as he flew upwards with all his might, and he even felt the poison be rapidly consumed and devoured as the black hole grew. Gritting his teeth, Jake stopped himself in the air and reached out, his hand glowing green.

Black veins spread up his arm as he infused his hand with even more energy, intensifying the glow. The poison within the black hole got new life as the suction lessened and became more unstable. The black hole was still growing, but it had slowed down.

As Jake considered what to do next, he saw the King move. Rather than retreat, the Unique Lifeform flew forward as his barrier glowed golden. Power revolved around him, and Jake realized what he was about to do.

Without a doubt, this was the trump card of the Ashen Phantom Devourer. It was well-known that all Unique Lifeforms were innately born with one such unique skill. The Devourer had one... and so had the Fallen King.

The King did not stop as he reached the black hole, and Jake helped as he channeled Touch to the extreme. He suddenly heard a crack. A deep scar had been formed on his mask before many smaller cracks and crevices appeared.

Below, Jake saw the King enter the black hole as the mask slipped off his face, falling towards the ground. Falling, because the very moment the King entered the domain of the Ashen Phantom Devourer, the suction stopped.

The world seemed still. Everything that had been floating in the air before had stopped, and Jake felt even his own poison be unable to move. Unable because what it resided within – the Soulshape of the Devourer – shuddered.

Shattered.

An invisible wave erupted from within the black hole. Jake summoned a barrier of stable arcane energy and, to his surprise, managed to entirely block it out, making him realize this was mere remnants of the actual attack.

Jake stared as everything the Devourer was consuming fell down again. Where the black hole had been, a single figure remained as an ivory claw reached out. The shattered mask, still falling, re-assembled in mid-air and was telekinetically called over as the King put it back on. In the other hand he held a small black orb that promptly disappeared.

The black hole was gone. The domain was gone. And all Jake felt were broken remnants of what had once been a soul floating in the air before dispersing – a bit of it entering Eternal Hunger, as always.

****You have slain [Ashen Phantom Devourer – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 195 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

Jake kept staring. The notification was there, but a hint of doubt still remained in his mind. It felt too... easy?

He began flying down as the King also descended to the ground. The Unique Lifeform landed and sat down as Jake felt the energy fluctuate within the King. He felt weak, far weaker than usual, and looking at the mask on the King and Jake himself, he was indeed damaged on a fundamental level.

“Is it dead?” Jake asked as he landed.

“You unleash an attack capable of destroying an entire region upon a creature that is effectively a living domain, further adding a massive toxic payload to the mayhem you

created, and you question its efficiency?” the King scoffed. “The Devourer is dead. The soul was weakened and capable of destruction, so I capitalized on the weakness and went in for the kill.”

Jake considered for a moment before grinning. “Turns out you Unique Lifeforms aren’t all you are hyped up to be.”

The King did not even bother responding to that. *“I, too, had to use my trump card and will find myself weakened for a period. I apologize. You will have to deal with the rest of your matters by yourself.”*

“That was the plan,” Jake said with a nod.

And he already knew the first matter to deal with. From up in the air, he had spotted a little nahoom rat keeping an eye on the King and the Devourer fighting.

“How unexpected, but not entirely unpredictable,” Ell’Hakan mused to himself the moment he got the message from the servant observing the fight between the two Unique Lifeforms. He had now sent a message that it appeared like someone else had also joined the fight, with the only likely culprit the Malefic’s Chosen.

Needless to say, he could not have an important bout between two Unique Lifeforms going on without keeping a constant eye on it. It was sad he could only get a brief message without any details, but just knowing it was happening was good enough. He did expect a more thorough report from the observer soon, but there was no need to wait for that.

Ell’Hakan had expected the Malefic’s Chosen to prioritize returning to Haven over engaging the Unique Lifeform. That the Ashen Phantom Devourer had yet to defeat this Fallen King was as to be expected, and he didn’t have his servants interfere for a reason. Either Unique Lifeform winning was simply not of particular interest to him, at least not if one won too fast.

The one winning would have to be the Ashen Phantom Devourer, though. With both the Fallen King and the Malefic’s Chosen there, the Unique Lifeform should be pressured, giving Ell’Hakan quite an opportunity if he said so himself. Keeping a Unique Lifeform loyal was difficult, but if he could get it to feel a sense of debt towards him, that would be more than welcome and extremely exploitable.

Now, as said, then he would naturally not allow such a battle to go on without having a method of keeping an eye on it, and in the same vein, he would not allow such a battle to take place without giving him a way to get there.

The house he had constructed was not just for him to reside in while waiting for the Malefic’s Chosen but also created to serve as a small hub for teleportation. Taking out a token, he called for one of the two people stationed in Haven to come over and operate

the teleportation circle for him to use. The distance required for the teleportation made it a necessity to have someone on this side.

Ell'Hakan waited as very soon he saw his servant rush towards him. Just before he could begin to gather the energy from the Sun and Moon array, he stopped. Something had suddenly appeared in the plains, looking like a rectangular wall or...

A painting?

Out stepped a figure Ell'Hakan did not immediately recognize, and his servant clearly didn't either as she continued running. It was only a few seconds later that Ell'Hakan realized who this newcomer was. *The Patriarch from the Noboru Clan.*

Unexpectedly, a second figure then also appeared out of thin air. A red liquid that Ell'Hakan surmised had to be blood formed a human-looking figure that promptly intercepted the servant. To his surprise, his servant was actually stopped in her tracks as a large wall of blood appeared and pushed her back.

The old man from the Noboru clan didn't even look back but began wandering through the plains towards Ell'Hakan. He looked relaxed, far more so than he should, and their eyes met as Ell'hakan frowned. He felt the emotions from the man, and they were not as expected.

He felt as if he was staring at a still lake and not a human being. Nevertheless, even if it was so, that didn't mean much in the grand scheme of things.

Ell'Hakan walked down the steps of his residence towards the old swordsman. Neither had their weapon drawn, and he saw no reason to be the first to do so. His servant dying would be an annoyance, but if push came to shove, the teleporter could still be activated and bring Ell'Hakan to his destination if he was fine with destroying it in the process and having the servant on the other side suffer the backlash.

However, that would put him far away from Haven, allowing the Malefic's Chosen to potentially retreat and make his way there before Ell'Hakan could. He still had things he wanted to be done here in Haven, and more importantly, *it* could only be activated in these plains outside of the small city. Besides, even if he lost this one servant to what he guessed was an unknown blood mage, there was another stationed in Haven he could call upon.

Needless to say, something had to be done before that was an option.

"Patriarch of the Noboru clan," Ell'Hakan spoke. "Your presence here intrigues me. Last I heard, you were dead, but I reckoned something was off about that, considering I haven't heard back from your killers-to-be."

Ell'Hakan estimated the human must have spent the last few months recuperating. After the fight during the Treasure Hunt event Earth had undergone, the Sword Saint, as people called him, had been cooped up and injured for several months. The only thing capable of leaving such harm was severe overuse of a boosting skill or soul damage. He guessed it was the overuse of a boosting skill, and it looked like he had to use that boosting skill once more to handle the two servants. If not, why would he not have handled internal matters of his clan?

"I apologize if it inconvenienced you that I killed the two of them," the old man surprisingly apologized. Not that there was a hint of actual regret in his emotional spectrum. Not a single ripple disturbed the lake.

"They went knowing death was a potential outcome. I do wonder why you have appeared here. Please, do enlighten me? From what I heard, your clan is in shambles and could very much need their Patriarch right now. Some of them have even reached out with interest in an alliance. It is not too late to reconsider," Ell'hakan said convincingly, trying to throw a rock into the lake.

"A shameful display, and only proof a cleaning of the old clan is required," the swordsman sighed, for the first time showing a faint hint of disappointment. It disappeared as fast as it had come, but it confirmed the man could not fully control his emotions. No human could. No... no living entity with emotions could fully control them. Not even gods.

Nodding, Ell'hakan believed he should stop wasting time. "Your attempt at buying time is valiant; however, I must disappoint you. While I would love a conversation, I have other, more pressing matters to attend to. I truly hold no interest in you or your clan, and I will give you the choice of leaving now or accepting the consequences of staying."

"Tell me, Ell'Hakan, was it?" the swordsman asked. "What do you think of this planet? Its lands and its residents?"

"Chaotic but malleable," Ell'Hakan answered, humoring him for a moment.

"Chaotic... yes, to that, I agree," the man nodded and smiled. "Secondly, you fought Jake Thayne, the Malefic's Chosen. What was your assessment of him?"

"Chaotic fits him very adequately too. Powerful, yes, but chaotic. I fail to see the purpose of this line of questioning outside of simply delaying me by piquing my curiosity?"

"I was curious too," the old human said as he slowly unsheathed a sword. The blade looked simple and unassuming, but Ell'Hakan felt uneasy when he looked at it. "Curious how far I have come. Please allow this old man the honor of your assessment, you who has conquered another world."

Ell'hakan was about to answer as the lake of emotions rippled and moved. His eyes opened wide as serenity was replaced with pure devotion, and an aura washed through the plains as the old human bent his knees - the mental image of his emotional state replacing a lake with that of a sword.

More than a distraction, Ell'Hakan realized as he took out his trident and got into a defensive position.

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

Chapter 553: Sun & Rain

Sword met trident as the clang of metal sent them both back. The blade rose again as the robed nahoom retreated with measured steps. Miyamoto pressed forward as several more blows were exchanged, his opponent backing away with every attack.

The mana in the air began to heat up as the swordsman dodged to avoid a beam of concentrated sunlight descending from far above. Around the alien invader, a ring of golden light formed as the very plains around them seemed to resonate with him. The ring moved to be in a position in front of Ell'Hakan as the trident stabbed forward, releasing an explosion of golden flames and forcing Miyamoto to leap back.

"This planet keeps perplexing me," Ell'Hakan spoke as he spun his trident, leaving trails of flames behind it. "The information on you was limited. I genuinely expected those two to be capable of killing you, and even if they failed, to at least put you out of commission for a good while. It appears I was way off."

"To reach for true power is to subvert fate and expectations," Miyamoto simply spoke as water droplets formed around him as if it rained around him.

Ell'Hakan responded by sending out a wave of golden flames as the sunlight above intensified. Several golden orbs appeared in the sky, all of them burning with deep flames. The Sword Saint countered as a thin mirror of water appeared and blocked out the flames entirely.

The nahoom had taken this brief chance to move as he turned into golden flames and appeared further back. Rising into the air, a magic circle appeared above him as he pointed towards the Sword Saint.

He wanted to move, but Miyamoto suddenly found space itself acting up. Like he got separated from reality itself.

"I must apologize, but I simply do not have the time to be fighting you right now," Ell'Hakan spoke. "Please be so kind as to begone."

The magic circle above him intensified in energy. Miyamoto had heard of this, and even if it was far weaker than what was used on Jake, it was still a very potent skill.

"Celestial Alignment of Yore."

Everything spun as the Sword Saint was sent flying. While in the air, he pointed his blade forward and closed his eyes. A plane of water condensed as he inserted his sword into it. Colors began to appear on the plane, and soon it depicted plains with a lonely small house sitting in the middle. The painting was not made from memory but one he had painstakingly painted only the day before.

Miyamoto willed the plane of water to move as he also stepped into it, appearing standing on the plains only a few hundred meters from where he had been before, a confused Ell'Hakan whipping around to see him stand there.

"I must also apologize," Miyamoto said, not a hint of being sorry in his voice. "My hobby happens to be painting."

"That was not space magic," Ell'Hakan said with a frown.

"No, it was not," Miyamoto spoke.

"Then was it-"

The Sword Saint charged forward without answering as water condensed around his blade. Ell'Hakan frowned even more as he was forced to block and sent backward. Miyamoto did not give him time to rest as the water droplets condensed even more around the tip of his blade as he stabbed forward.

A single droplet was shot forward, drawing the first blood of their battle. A thin cut tore through Ell'Hakan's robe and left a slit on the side of his arm. Miyamoto moved to attack again, but his opponent's body language made him reconsider as he stepped down hard and jumped back.

Just in time, too, as a massive beam of sunlight shot down and left a huge scorch mark just where he would have been standing. Opening his eyes wide, the Sword Saint swept his blade upwards and sent out a crescent wave of water that encountered another massive beam.

It was cut in two, leaving him unscathed as the water refracted the light. However, even so, Ell'Hakan was clearly done playing around. A dense aura of heat spread from him as the plains themselves were set ablaze. The sun seemed to almost turn entirely red as the sky above resonated with the burning plains below.

"This time, I genuinely apologize. I shall take you seriously."

The sun above pulsed as a wave of red light descended upon the plains. Miyamoto opened his eyes wide as suddenly the sun seemed to disappear from the sky above, only to reappear below the horizon far behind Ell'Hakan.

"Sunrise."

A blast of flames forced Miyamoto back. A barrier of water protected him as he smiled. He landed on the ground and shifted his stance as he held the handle of his blade with both hands. His boosting skill activated as he also got serious.

"Rainblade."

Water met fire as their two domains clashed. Ell'Hakan turned into red flames as he stormed forward, the Sword Saint responding in kind. They exchanged several blows, the Sword Saint slowly winning out as the nahoom was pushed back.

So far, the only wound given had been that minor cut, but that all changed now. Several small scratches began to appear on Ell'Hakan, but Miyamoto did not relax. The gaze of his foe was calm and collected. He did not panic in the slightest, even as he took a cut on his shoulder, forcing him to retreat.

Swiping his blade, the Sword Saint sent a long crescent wave of water out, making Ell'Hakan vault over it. He pointed his trident forward and shot a condensed beam of light, singeing the Sword Saint's left arm slightly as he failed to dodge in time.

Not feeling deterred, he moved forward again and pointed his blade.

"Ten Thousand Droplets."

As he willed, ten thousand small droplets appeared and shot forward. A vast wall of red flames met them, evaporating most, but some got through as Ell'Hakan was hit and stumbled back with dozens of minor puncture wounds covering his chest.

Yet he seemed relatively unbothered. The trident moved again as the middle of the three forks lit up. The sun behind him then began rising as the temperature rose, and the sky itself began burning. An endless inferno descended upon the old man as he met it with the serenity of an undisturbed lake.

Water whirled around his sword as Rainblade made his sword an instrument of the element itself. He slashed as a wave of water appeared that rapidly multiplied and countered the fire descending towards him. In the same fluid movement, he positioned his blade and blocked the trident of Ell'Hakan, feeling that the alien had gotten even stronger than before.

Physically, the Sword Saint was perhaps superior, but Ell'Hakan did not simply rely on his physical stats. Every attack was infused with a powerful concept. Not that the Sword Saint found himself on the backfoot due to this.

Their weapons flew through the air and clashed multiple times. Miyamoto analyzed his opponent and slowly began to once more gain the upper hand. With an upwards strike, he made Ell'Hakan attempt to dodge, but the blade pivoted to the side and turned the slash into a sideways sweep.

The alien tried to teleport, but droplets of water had landed upon him to restrict his movements ever-so-slightly. The blade sank into the side of Ell'Hakan, but he managed to turn to flames, leaving a spray of blood in his wake.

He appeared again a few hundred meters away, his side entirely cut up. His left lumbar was halfway cut through in what would have been a lethal blow pre-system. Miyamoto considered charging again but held himself back.

"The sharpness of that blade... you cut through my bones like they were nothing," Ell'Hakan spoke in a contemplating tone. "I wonder, why is someone like you working for the Malefic's Chosen? What do you have to gain by doing so?"

The Sword Saint just smirked a bit to himself as he sheathed his blade. "What do you have to gain by invading the planet of another Chosen? Much less one who has nothing to do with you. You are the only one who chose to make an enemy, not him. In my eyes, the questionable decisions in this entire conflict are one-sided. There is an aggressor and a defender, with the natural inclination of man being to side with the defender."

Ell'Hakan looked at the Sword Saint a bit more before shaking his head. "You have no reason beyond personal sentiment? Do you honestly see your clan thrive more under the oppressive rule of the Order of the Malefic Viper compared to the United Cities Alliance? An alliance that is even protected by Valhal from outside forces. Meanwhile, the Order tends to make the areas they control living hells for those not part of their cult."

"I fail to comprehend the purpose of your words," Miyamoto smiled. "He who stands before you is nothing more than a simple lone swordsman. Order, Alliance, gods. Nothing else matters when two warriors meet. Unless you choose to continue this meeting as non-warriors, then cease your needless words. I say this assuming you came here as a warrior, to begin with, of course."

The nahoom's smile faded as Miyamoto knew something was coming. Underestimating his foe was something he would never do, and he prepared to draw.

Ell'Hakan raised his trident towards the sky. A beam of light descended upon him as Miyamoto saw the air shimmer. His water droplets began to evaporate, and his skin

burned as the temperature rose even more than before. Up in the sky, the sun now hung right above his head.

“Scorching Noon.”

Miyamoto also exploded with power as he fully activated his boosting skill to stave off the constant exposure. Ell'Hakan also clearly did something similar as his skin began glowing orange. The plains – now entirely clean of vegetation - also glowed, and the Sword Saint felt the area itself feed whatever skill the alien was using.

Fighting a foe in their territory is always more complicated.

Taking a stance, the Sword Saint drew his blade once more and, with the draw, released a torrent of water as if he had just opened a floodgate. The nahoom was taken by surprise and sent blasting back as Miyamoto followed the flow of water and made a downward cut.

His blade encountered the trident, making the feet of his foe embedded in the ground from the impact. The water covering his body allowed Miyamoto to ignore the sunlight for now, but he felt the draw on his resources.

Ell'Hakan responded as the trident seemed to explode, sending Miyamoto back a few steps. Refusing to lose momentum, the old man attacked again but was blocked. Blocked and countered. His speed fell behind his foe as he took a minor cut on the arm and another minor scratch on his thigh. Both wounds burned with golden flames, forcing him to expend even more energy putting them out.

Yet he attacked again. The flow of water was relentless, and so was he. After dodging an attack, he found an opening and stabbed forward. The blade extended and penetrated into his foe, but as it was just a blade of water, it failed to cut through bone.

Ell'Hakan groaned and stumbled back as his eyes burned. He raised the trident and slammed it into the ground with both hands.

“Ember Chains.”

The flames all around the old man suddenly condensed and formed chains as they came from all directions. He cut through several, but two managed to wrap around his one leg, tethering him to the ground and burning him.

“Sunwrath.”

The entire world seemed to turn golden at that very moment. From above, a massive pillar of pure light and fire descended upon the lone swordsman as he stood chained. He knew it was too late to dodge, so he used one of his rare defensive skills just as the attack hit.

Sunlight seared into the ground as everything around it burned, yet no one was caught within.

Miyamoto landed on the ground a few dozen meters to the left of it while taking a deep tired breath. He had many nasty burns all over his body, and what little hair he had was already seared off. Where he had landed was where he had been only ten or so seconds ago. Fresh chapters posted on ***novel~fire~net***

"Time magic," Ell'Hakan recognized out loud. "Who the hell are you really?"

"A swordsman," Miyamoto simply answered. This did not please his opponent as another dozen or so, albeit far weaker, sunbeams shot down from the sky aimed at the old man. Not seeing himself be outdone, he also began releasing ranged attacks, putting the alien on the defensive and leaving a few cuts here and there on his body.

He felt a hint of tiredness from constantly fighting under the intense sunlight, and he knew his foe was also getting tired. He knew by now he had more than fulfilled his task, and Ms. Wells had already tried to contact him once.

The old man had not answered, but he knew the outcome. One attempt to contact meant victory, two meant it was a draw, and three would have meant failure. Seeing as they had won, there was truly no reason but his own hubris to continue the fight.

But had Jake not said a bit more selfishness was healthy? If so, the old man would relish this opportunity to face a strong foe and show him that he, too, had not stopped growing stronger. A Chosen was a multiversally recognized title only given to supreme talents. Something many also apparently considered him. Miyamoto found it weird to call himself a talent, considering it was usually a title given to juniors, but he still wanted to prove himself.

For the longest time, he had been resistant to having a Patron. Aeon, the Primordial of Time, convinced him that his stance was, in many ways, nonsensical. A Patron did not need to be someone you worshipped as much as they could be subtle guiding lights. Moreover, the Sword Saint had found that he and his new Patron was more alike than one would perhaps expect.

While he had not taught Miyamoto much, the old man had learned a few things. The concept of time was vast and neverending, and comprehending the nomological was as much about understanding yourself and your goals as it was understanding the world. In the same way, it also requires one to understand their position within this world.

Miyamoto knew he was a man that arguably should not even be alive. He had seen death more than once, and each time he had overcome it, or it just hadn't been his time yet. He had been granted one more season. After his fight with Jake, he realized that in this changed world, it was no longer about accepting what you had been granted and making the best use of it. It was as much about taking from the world.

His realizations had led to enlightenment and Transcendence. A Transcendence was viewed as the pinnacle of what one could achieve, but Miyamoto knew that wasn't the case. Nothing could ever be truly perfect, and there was nothing that could not be honed. Nothing that could not be trained with and be used in different ways.

This was the second thing his Patron had taught him. A Transcendence was far more than a single skill. It was a gateway and a Path. A recognition from the world itself.

Ell'Hakan regarded him as the alien levitated into the air. Miyamoto knew something big was coming, but he did not hold any fear. He sheathed his blade and bent his knees as he got into position.

"Well then, swordsman," Ell'Hakan spoke. "Please also assess me as I assess you. Shatter my expectations more."

His words were not spoken in a tone of mockery. There was genuine respect in his voice, and his request was not a joke either.

The old man would oblige.

In the sky above, the sun turned entirely red. The sky was bathed orange, and the world was set aflame. The only place untouched in the plains was a small bubble around the Sword Saint as he stood with closed eyes, focusing.

All of the fire and heat then began condensing above the floating figure. A second celestial object slowly formed as a small sun was born. Ell'Hakan's entire body burned as he stabbed his trident into it, turning it entirely golden.

Lowering the spear, the sun followed as it began descending towards the Sword Saint like a giant fireball of certain destruction.

"Sunfall."

The heat was overwhelming, and the soil and sand all around the old swordsman began to change. Small pits of lava appeared, the sand turned to glass, and everything that couldn't burn melted. Yet as everything was at the zenith... the sky darkened.

A drop of water fell upon the lava that had formed, turning it into black obsidian. Clouds appeared and blotted out the sun as the Sword Saint changed. His wrinkled hand turned smooth, black hair grew from his temples, and for a moment in time, he was in the prime of his youth.

"Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut."

He unsheathed his blade as the heavens shook and the clouds parted.

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Chapter 554: Miscalculations & A Third Meeting

The heat dispersed as the sun was severed in two. The world flashed as it exploded, blanketing the entire plains in flames that washed over the old swordsman. His stance held firm as all the fire soon enough stopped.

Clouds above were parted as if a giant blade had cut them open. Miyamoto lowered his blade as his body wrinkled again, and his black hair turned gray, with most of it falling off. At least the burned-off eyebrows and what little hair he did have before getting it burned off had returned.

“A Transcendent...”

The rain had already stopped falling, and the sun above dimmed. The Sword Saint frowned and squinted as he saw the form of Ell'Hakan be revealed. A part of his thigh and his entire left arm had been severed, but his stance remained strong.

Miyamoto had hoped to do more.

Ell'Hakan regarded his injuries as flames licked the wounds. The sun was no longer red, but gentle flames still descended as Miyamoto saw them heal the enemy Chosen. The Sword Saint considered his next move. To have a single Glimpse was something he could do without any significant backlash, but more than that would lead to consequences. To fully use Springtime Advent was also an option, but one he would naturally prefer to do without.

Just as he considered all this, his opponent dismissed his trident and floated down, and landed on the ground.

“You called it a glimpse,” Ell'Hakan spoke. “Which must mean that should you truly call upon it...”

The alien sighed. “You asked for my assessment. It appears you entirely fell outside of any I could have possibly had before we fought, but now that we have clashed, I believe I understand. You are truly just an old swordsman, in all its purity and all its power. I thank you, but continuing this battle would be detrimental to both of us, wouldn't it?”

Miyamoto did not disagree. “You, too, asked for my assessment. While you are powerful, you seem to walk different Paths. Writing a story and trying to form a legend is

not something one can force but something that is born from truly monumental events. You can try but never guarantee success. No strategy or plan will ever work perfectly... but I have a feeling you already knew this."

Ell'Hakan smiled. "Several minutes ago, I already got the message that the Ashen Phantom Devourer has fallen. If your primary objective was to delay me, then I will wholeheartedly admit defeat. Several miscalculations were made, the biggest of which being the Malefic's Chosen's speed at getting back and, perhaps more importantly, your existence. I heard the natives of this world call you the Sword Saint. An earned name."

The old man simply nodded in recognition, seeing no need to speak anymore.

"Considering all this, I must say my goodbyes and bow out. Once more, I thank you, this was an enlightening encounter. However, I will leave you with a warning. While you may not see it happening now, the Order of the Malefic Viper is a faction to be wary of. The Malefic's Chosen may strike you as a person worth trusting, but I felt his instability. He would not make a good leader, and I find it highly probable that other forces will simply make use of him until those with actual power in the Order steps up and takes over. So decide. Either give this planet to the Order of the Malefic Viper or find a way to push them off it entirely," Ell'Hakan said.

Miyamoto frowned, not due to the words but what was lacking. He felt no emotional manipulation at all, and while it was possible he could just not detect it, he didn't feel that was the case.

"Another miscalculation you have is in regards to Jake Thayne. I do agree he is not a good leader, and I do not see that changing. Leading is simply not his Path, but you view him as solely chaotic. I see more than that. You are not the only one who has clashed with him and made an assessment, and it is my turn to apologize now. I trust my own assessment far more than yours, young man," the Sword Saint answered.

"Fair enough. I hope, for your sake, your choice turns out for the best. If not, then I am sure countless factions in the multiverse would gladly offer you a position. Perhaps my biggest miscalculation was to focus so much on the Malefic's Chosen and not those who had chosen to gather around him," Ell'Hakan said.

"Now, I had more I wanted to do and say, but staying here only puts me further at risk. It would be silly for me to stay only to figure out the Malefic's Chosen somehow had a teleportation circle set up or something akin to that, leaving me to face a battle between two monsters. So may we meet again, Sword Saint. It truly was a pleasure," the nahoom spoke.

The house had been broken during the fight, but it appeared that a teleportation circle had still been protected beneath the rubble. Ell'Hakan turned into flames and appeared atop it, and Miyamoto made no attempt to stop him as he teleported away, the circle exploding in his wake.

A minute or so passed as a figure of blood condensed beside the Sword Saint. Iskar, the former Monarch of Blood, looked at Miyamoto and spoke. "He left? I should have figured after that servant woman decided to end herself."

Miyamoto nodded. He took out a token and crushed it as he waited for Ms. Wells to contact him. He reckoned by the time he did so, Ell'Hakan would already be far gone from Earth.

Perhaps for the better. Because Ell'Hakan was not the only one who had made major miscalculations.

Jake was about to leave towards where he had seen the nahoom as he remembered something even more important.

"Wait, where is the loot?" Jake asked the King.

The King just looked at Jake. *"It is mine. I can make far better use of it, and this entire scenario only took place because of you. Killing the Ashen Phantom Devourer means a victory for you against an enemy Chosen, while it does little for me. Therefore, is it not only reasonable that I, at the very least, get the tangible bounty?"*

"You could have just said you ninja-looted it. No reason to try and justify yourself. This is why I don't do group hunting, by the way," Jake said with quite a bit of snark as he unfolded his wings and took to the sky towards where he had seen the little observer.

He was still waiting for word from the Sword Saint on how his confrontation with Ell'Hakan had gone. Jake was not afraid of the old man dying in the slightest, but there was the risk of him overextending himself using his Transcendence. Ell'Hakan dying was not even a potential outcome in his mind.

Flying over, Jake detected a presence there. One far more powerful than what he would expect of some nahoom scout or observer. One that also felt oddly familiar, though he could not place where he had felt it before.

As Jake got closer, he saw a surprising sight. A nahoom was lying on the ground, clearly unconscious, while someone in a suit of armor stood by him. On a second inspection, the suit of armor was more like that of a golem or something with no openings anywhere.

That was when Jake recognized him. More accurately, he recognized the armor. He recognized the feelings of smashing that armor into the ground, bending and tearing it apart as the person inside of it was made into a mushy soup of flesh, blood, and bones. Jake Identified him as he flew closer and landed a dozen or so meters away.

[Human – lvl 199]

He had to dig into his memory a little to recall the name. Thinking about it, this was only their third-ever time meeting, and Jake reckoned it would go the same way as every other encounter. Maybe... because he didn't feel anything from the other party. Not a single shred of hostility or bloodlust. Due to the armor, Jake could not actually see the person himself, so it was hard to really say anything quite yet.

Hence Jake opened with the most relevant question.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

And a relevant question that was. Because what the hell was he doing there? Why had he knocked out the nahoom? Why had he clearly just been standing back and not trying to interfere with the fight? Based on his track record, trying to strike Jake mid-fight would totally be something he would do, so why hadn't he?

The young man didn't answer, making Jake consider if maybe he had read it wrong and he had just left the armor there, but his senses told him that there was a human inside of it. Jake then considered if he should just rip it open and see for himself but the young man finally spoke.

"...confront..." he said in a meek voice that Jake could barely hear even with his Perception. He did pick up that one word, though.

"To confront me?" Jake asked. "Well, what are you waiting for then. I am right here. Shit, shouldn't I be the one confronting you? Did you just come here to get your skull bashed in again, or what? Make some goddamn sense."

He did really consider just attacking, but he held himself back. The situation was just too weird. William was strong. A level 199 human, a talented mage based on all Jake had heard, and he had briefly faced Caleb and come out on top. Yet, even so, he had done nothing ever since returning to Earth besides that one time he decided messing with Jake's family was a good idea. He had missed every single World Congress despite clearly having a Pylon. He hadn't even taken part in the Treasure Hunt or the Myriad Paths event, which once more made no fucking sense.

Finally, the biggest reason was the psychologist lady that Jake had spoken with at the end of the first World Congress. He still remembered their conversation vividly due to how weird it had been. She had been almost apologetic about what William had done. It was not outright said that he was a changed psycho back then, but it was heavily insinuated he was, at the very least, not as bad as before.

Oh, and the fact that she explicitly stated that William's experience in the Tutorial had given him PTSD, something Jake honestly had a hard time seeing. To suffer from something like that was far less common due to the system, and it wasn't like it was just something that naturally happened due to death. Jacob had died once, Bertram had

died dozens of times as far as Jake had heard, and even the King had been killed by Jake once.

Moreover, it was the kind of thing that would disappear with time usually. Sure, there could still be remnants, but this felt way too extreme.

Yet, as he saw the mute armor in front of him, it was hard to deny. Also, if he did suffer from PTSD and was afraid of Jake, seeing the fight he just had with the Ashen Phantom Devourer probably hadn't helped the matter.

"I..." William stammered, making Jake shake his head. The source of this content is *novel**fire**net*

"Take off that damn armor already. It didn't help you last time, and trust me when I say it won't this time either."

To his surprise, the young man obliged. The armor seemed to turn liquid as a young human was revealed, looking very much the same as the first time Jake saw him in the Tutorial. Visually, that is. The aura he gave off was far removed from the one he had back then. Far more muted and meek.

Jake did not talk but just stood there staring at the kid. William didn't even look up but just stared at the ground. While Jake had deactivated Arcane Awakening and was currently suffering from a period of weakness, he also knew he could activate it right away if need be.

Not that he thought he needed to. William was about as scary as a wet noodle the way he currently was.

"...orry..." Jake once more heard a meek voice say.

"Do you want me to go closer, or do you want to speak up?" Jake asked.

"Sorry," the young man repeated, still staring at the ground.

"Sorry is such an easy word, isn't it?" Jake scoffed. "What are you sorry for? Come on, say it out loud."

Did Jake know he was being a dick? Yes, yes, he did. Did Jake care that he was being a dick towards William? No, no, he did not.

William had only ever been an annoyance at best to Jake. At worst, he had been the person Jake had perhaps ever hated the most. Yet, as Jake stood before him like this, he just felt weird about it. If someone had asked him earlier that day what Jake would do if he met William, Jake would have first asked who William was again and then proceeded to clarify that he would replay their last meeting by curbstomping him.

“The Tutorial...” William began. “Your parents... brother... Reika... Sultan... the Church... Ell’Hakan... City Alliance... everything.”

Jake was about to say something after the first three but stopped. Reika, Sultan, Church? Had he even helped Ell’Hakan somehow? Did he work for the United Cities Alliance now? Rather than just get an apology, Jake felt like he got a bunch of questions.

Realizing things were a bit more complicated, Jake wanted to get to the bottom of it. But before all that, one more question still needed to be answered.

“You never properly answered: why are you here? What are you hoping to accomplish?” Jake asked.

William hesitated but finally answered. “I... am stuck.”

“I am going to assume you don’t mean literally stuck as you seem to be able to move perfectly well, so how are you stuck?” Jake asked sarcastically.

“Evolution quest,” William muttered. “Can’t find my Path.”

Jake listened and quickly got it. Considering how much he had talked to the Viper and how much he had heard from lessons and others, he did get the general gist of people being stuck and unable to advance. Having a mental block was a very common obstacle of progress. That William had Jake as a mental block that he needed to overcome was surprising, but it probably shouldn’t be.

“And you hoped that confronting me like this can help with that,” Jake explained for the kid. “Which begs the question, what do you want from me? To see if you could beat me? See if I would kill you? Well, congratulations, you are wrong on all fronts.”

William finally seemed to stir a little as Jake kept going. “Quite frankly, I don’t care about you. The only times your existence has even crossed my mind was when you annoyed me. Today I had to remind myself who you even were. You mean nothing to me and are nothing more than a bad memory at this point. So if you want a clean break or whatever, it is entirely one-sided, as I broke away from you long ago. But now that you have shown up in front of me, you got me curious. Tell me what you have been up to all this time and why the hell you thought it was a good idea to keep fucking with the guy who already killed you once.”

Did Jake know by now that William was scared shitless of him? Well, yeah, of course.

Did he actually care and had a desire to help William overcome this fear?

Fuck no.

He just wanted to know how big of a mess the moron had made.

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Chapter 555: 0/10 Master, Would Not Recommend

What the actual fuck, Jake thought as William finally started stringing together sentences more than a few words long. He began to explain what he had done since returning from the Tutorial, and it all just felt so odd to hear.

Right after returning, he had met up with the psychiatrist – not a psychologist, Jake still kinda didn't know the difference – as well as her child. They had then set off, and William had leveled, gotten a Pylon, and done all that one would expect someone to do in the early days of the system.

Besides going to the first World Congress, that is. Both because William did not want to go, but his Master had also discouraged it.

From that first mention of his Master, Jake began to notice the pattern.

William had then kept doing what he did, and... well, he had done a lot more than Jake knew. He had met with Reika and talked to her while she made her way to Haven. He had met Sultan at some point too, and he had even met Jacob several times. As for what he had done with them? Well... asked them questions and talked to them or something like that?

Jake asked why he did what he did, and his answer was consistent. It was what his Master had recommended. Not even William knew the purpose of much of what he did; he was effectively just reading a script. As time went on, it also sounded like he started to question Eversmile less and less.

The Treasure Hunt? His Master had also told him going to that was a bad idea and that it would be better to head for where Jake and Caleb's parents lived to learn more about Jake.

Second World Congress? William had considered going, but his Master had once more said it would be a waste of time.

William had also helped Ell'Hakan by proxy as he helped awaken memories in beasts. Why he had done this, the young man admitted he didn't know. He said as much quite

clearly, yet one thing lacked. There was no real questioning anymore, just an admittance he didn't know.

He also mentioned the nightmares. From the time William had nearly died while killing Richard, he had suffered from nightmares whenever he slept and even sometimes while he meditated. After Jake had killed him for real, the nightmares had only gotten worse, and Jake was apparently the primary topic of these nightmares.

So that explained why the PTSD just kept trucking along and seemed to not get better even with a professional like Ms. Kim around. Oh yeah, William talked about Ms. Kim a lot. Enough for Jake to feel weird about it.

The final thing that really put the nail in the coffin was the Myriad Paths event. His Master had said that William already knew his Path and didn't need it. It was with this last one Jake especially caught on. That he truly took note of the one commonality in all of William's horrible decisions after the Tutorial.

"Holy shit," Jake said after William was done talking. By now, he had taken a seat on a stone with William having barely moved besides shifting his feet here and there.

One thing was clear from all of this. Clear to Jake, but not William, that is.

Eversmile, William's Master, did not actually give a shit about William or his progress in the slightest. No, that wasn't even right. It was more than that. Eversmile had been actively handicapping William for some inexplicable reason, and Jake had no idea why.

"Did you never stop to think for yourself for a single second?" Jake asked William. While William was a naïve moron, the young man had not given Jake the impression he was a complete idiot. Was the fact that he was being fucked over not evident enough? Google search *novel·fire·net*

William seemed confused by the question. At this point, Jake's annoyance at encountering the young man had nearly been entirely replaced with curiosity to figure out what the hell was going on. Almost. He also wasn't quite at the stage where pity became a thing.

"Eversmile, or Master as you call him, is clearly the reason why you can't advance in your Path," Jake easily concluded. "Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with you? He has been cutting off your legs beneath you at every turn to handicap you. Jeez, how blind are you?"

"I... Master is the only reason I even made it as far as I did and-" William tried to argue, actually showing a bit of spirit.

"Bull-fucking-shit," Jake scoffed. "Who the hell can't evolve to C-grade with the kind of start you got, being blessed by a Primordial and all that? Shit, even without the events,

you should have been able to. Think for just a single second here. If your dear Master guided you so thoroughly, then why are you still stuck? Why is the Path he has shown you not one that works? I would begin to question my GPS if it made me drive into a wall.”

William did not answer but just looked confused. He also looked up for the first time, made eye contact with Jake, and promptly proceeded to look back down. In that brief second that they exchanged glances, what Jake saw in William’s eyes surprised him a bit. There was only fear and what Jake could almost describe as hopelessness.

It reminded him a bit of Phillip, the man who used to lead the Fort. He, too, had given up and more or less retired, with no desire to really do anything, and approached everything half-heartedly. Yet he had bounced back. Even now, he was holding down the fort in Haven while keeping all those from the United Cities Alliance in a political chokehold.

Jake just signed. “Alright, let’s go over things a bit. First of all, why did you go to Nevermore? What did you gain from it? You did not use the power and temporary advantage for anything as far as I can tell.”

“Master said I would need it...” William muttered.

Jake just sighed again.

“You know, I asked the Viper if I should maybe head to Nevermore. Wanna hear what he said? That the only reason one would go to Nevermore in D-grade was if one didn’t think they would make it to C-grade, had no true confidence in their ability to compete as a C-grade, or because they were fanatics part of the Primordial Church that went there for scholarly reasons or whatever. I, of course, asked why, and he explained that Nevermore has a few rules and restrictions. Due to this, then while one can enter at D-grade, it is smarter to wait for C-grade. Also, one can enter some competition or leaderboard or something like that if entering still in early C-grade, but if one went in D-grade, that isn’t possible,” Jake explained.

“That...” William hesitated. “Master never mentioned that, I-“

“If you don’t trust me, then maybe ask yourself why Ell’Hakan hasn’t gone either. Why no one from Earth has gone beside you. The answer is simple: because it is a bloody dumb idea,” Jake reiterated. “You are aware I have been outside of the universe. I spent months at a time away. Why would I not have gone to Nevermore? I am waiting for C-grade, that is why.”

William kept quiet as Jake kept going.

“Also, you talk about nightmares. Pretty funny now that I think about it. I have only had one real nightmare since the system arrived, and you know why that was? Because

Eversmile was the one who caused it to mess with me. And now you say you are suffering from nightmares? What a coincidence, eh?" Jake said, shaking his head.

"Skipping all of the system events was also moronic. You kept saying your Master said they were not needed or a bad idea, which just leads me back to the same question from before: did you ever stop to fucking think? Why did my Patron recommend going? Why did Valhal, the Court of Shadows, Holy Church, or every single faction with just a fraction of knowledge of the multiverse put such importance on these events? Because they do matter. It isn't about having found your Path or not; it is about the sheer amount and level of Records offered from these events. They are our advantage as a new universe."

"It... makes no sense," William actually argued. "Why would Master spend so many resources to revive me? Why bless me? Why spend so much time just to harm me? What could he possibly gain from me not taking part in events?"

"Fuck if I know," Jake admitted. "Eversmile is insane. He is a scientist who just does shit to see what happens. But I do know why he wanted you out of events."

It was actually quite simple. Others had already made use of this "feature" of the system events, such as Jacob when he warned Casper about the planned attack of the Holy Church on the Risen.

"The system restricts all outside connections during these events, including divine ones. While in the World Congress or Treasure Hunt or whatever, you can't talk to them, and more importantly, you can't be influenced by them," Jake explained. "So that is clearly why he didn't want you there. Geez, how much did he fuck with your mind, I wonder? Any idea?"

The last part was not spoken to William. The two of them had been there for some time, and that seemed to have attracted the attention of a certain Unique Lifeform. The King had appeared from below the ledge close by and landed on the ground.

"The metal mage," the King simply said. "I remember him. He killed one of the Beast Lords during the Tutorial, did he not? Ah, yes. I observed him too for a while until he met his end to you. How does he even live? All I remember was seeing him die, and then I was unable to observe the area for a period."

The King had spoken to both William and Jake despite clearly not caring much about the young metal mage. Jake did not want to explain either but just gave the cliff notes. "Killed by me, resurrected by a Primordial who loves karmic magic, and now it looks like the disciple of the karmic fucker has become the one being fucked with."

"Explains some things," the King merely said.

"Like what?" Jake asked curiously.

"His pathetic state," the King pointed out, his interest in the conversation waning by the second.

Jake considered what the King said and nodded. "True, he does seem like an entirely different person, and not only in a positive way. He is like a damn husk of nothingness."

William did not argue any of this as he just looked to be deep in thought. Jake decided to change the topic a bit as he pointed to the knocked-out nahoom on the ground.

"What's up with him?" Jake asked. "I can see you knocked him out, but why did you do that? I thought you worked with Ell'Hakan."

"I did," William said. "Maybe. I helped guide the Ashen Phantom Devourer towards this mountain range, and I helped bring together some powerful beasts and stuff."

The King finally seemed interested again. *"You work with those annoyances? Explains why they came together if a third party was facilitating it."*

"Back to the nahoom," Jake said. "Why knock him out?"

"I didn't want him to know about this," William answered, confused.

"What I was asking was not necessarily why you stopped him from observing but why you knocked him out. Not to unnecessarily bring up the past, but your go-to tends to be just killing people without any particular reason, doesn't it?" Jake asked curtly.

"I... try not to kill..." William said. "Ms. Kim said that taking a life needs to be a deeply considered action, not just something you do."

"Now I feel like you are calling me out," Jake shook his head, not sure to even believe it. "So, the psycho turned all saintly, huh? Then tell me. What are you going to do now? You know, considering you have been fucked over by your so-called Master so badly, I could just do you a favor and end you here and now? That is one way to pay for all your sins if you feel bad about everything you've done."

William actually looked like he seriously considered it for a moment but finally just shook his head.

"I promised Ms. Kim..." William said in a meek tone.

"So what are you doing then? From the looks of it, you haven't renounced your Blessing yet. Pretty sure I would feel that, so what is the hold-up?" Jake said.

"I... Master isn't answering... but... this doesn't make any fucking sense!" William finally exploded and looked up. "No fucking sense! Master has helped me so much, spent

ages teaching me karmic magic, guided me, given me tips and advice, and you say that was all to fuck with me!?”

“Sounds like it,” Jake shrugged.

“Why!? Give me one good reason! Why use the Leaf of Yggrasil, why give me a powerful weapon, why help me find the people I wanted to find after returning to Earth, and why help me awaken my Bloodline!? Why would he do all of this for some sick joke!?”

Jake was about to answer but bit onto something towards the end of his outburst.

“Bloodline?” Jake asked, confused.

“Yes! My Bloodline! You have one, right? So do I! So why are we so different! Why-“

“The mere fact you ask if I have a Bloodline is evidence enough,” Jake said.

“Evidence of what!?”

“You don’t have a fucking Bloodline, you dunce. Was that another damn lie he told you? I guess he didn’t tell you that everyone with a Bloodline can feel others with one. I have met those with Bloodlines, and you sure don’t have one. Oh, Eversmile probably told you some bullshit about this being a lie or something, right? Damn, hit that right on the nail, huh?” Jake said, tossing in the last part as he saw William about to protest.

“I have a Bloodline... the system says so,” William still argued.

“Do you have a Bloodline Patriarch title?” Jake asked.

“...no?” William asked.

“Well, the other guy from Earth with a Bloodline does. I do. Shit, this is getting more personal than I like, but what is your Bloodline about? Just some basic stuff,” Jake said.

William clamped up to that, but the King came in and asked. *“At the very least, share the rarity. If you do so, then the hunter shall share too, will he not?”*

Jake was confused about what the hell the King was getting at, considering Bloodline did not really have rarities, but he quickly understood what the King was hinting at. “Yeah, sure, that seems fair enough.”

The young man hesitated for a bit but finally answered. “Mine is ancient rarity...”

“A lie it is. Bloodlines do not truly have rarities,” the King answered before Jake could. *“They are classified as Bloodline Abilities and not skills, to begin with, even*

having their own spot in the status screen, making them not part of your race, class, or profession. The only rarity a Bloodline can have is Unique, and that only appears if you are the only being in existence with your specific Bloodline."

Jake threw the King a look of surprise at how much he knew about Bloodlines. What he said was entirely correct and aligned with what Jake had learned and experienced.

William now looked even more lost than before as he just stared at the two of them. Several seconds passed before Jake spoke again.

"I really hope we established by now that Eversmile is a right-bastard, and honestly a piece of shit of a Primordial. Oh, and apparently also a horrible teacher."

The young metal mage did not respond but had gone back to staring at the ground.

"The young metal caster I saw during the Tutorial was a human with drive and goals. One who sought power selfishly and slaughtered anything in his way. I am not saying that version was better, but at least he moved according to his own will and not the will of another. You may think you have changed, but fundamentally I do not believe you humans can truly change that much," the King said.

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Jake agreed. "You were a grade-A asshole, but at least you were a grade-A asshole of your own twisted volition. I totally understand why the system would say you need to find your Path because you seem to have completely lost all will to actually progress. Why are you even getting stronger? What for? Just to make the Master that you now learned is a lying piece of shit happy?"

"I... don't know," William muttered.

"Well, sounds like something you need to figure the fuck out. You don't even need a good reason to want to get stronger; it just needs to be your reason. Your Path."

Jake's words seemed to sink in as William looked deep in thought. Jake felt proud he was getting through as he suddenly felt a mental nudge.

The King looked at Jake and sent him a private telepathic idea. *"May I know why you decided to help a former enemy overcome this obstacle?"*

Jake looked at the King, puzzled. He was about to answer when he stopped himself.

"I... kinda just got caught up in the moment?"

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Chapter 556: End of Conflict: The Start of Another

The King had indeed asked a very pertinent question. Why the hell was Jake even wasting a second of his time on William? The little psycho was not an ally, a friend, or even an acquaintance. Shit, he was worse than a stranger in that he was a former enemy.

However, Jake's curiosity had won out. Eversmile was someone who had fucked with Jake before, and Jake had assumed that William was his favored little disciple, but now it turned out that he, too, was just another guinea pig to be fucked with and discarded.

Or was he? That was the big question. Was all of this a part of Eversmile's plan? Maybe the plan was that Jake should kill William and somehow form a karmic connection between Eversmile and Jake? Maybe it was for William to try and kill Jake or something?

Maybe Jake had no fucking idea and should probably stop guessing what a Primordial that had lived for trillions of years was thinking? Even Villy said he didn't truly understand Eversmile and found him perhaps the most unpredictable of all the Primordials.

Now, what would Jake then do? He still had the option of just killing William, but that just seemed too damn meaningless. He did not give Jake the impression he would even fight, meaning he would likely just run away if Jake tried anything. Could Jake catch him? Maybe, but what would he get out of that? Jake didn't even think it would give a single level.

What the future threat level of William represented was also something to assess. Jake could, for obvious reasons, not accurately predict this, but his gut told him it was low-to-nonexistent. William was still scared of Jake, and Jake was totally okay with that. He had also not really done anything to harm Jake or those around him since returning to Earth, and the ambiguous things he had done, like messing with Jake's parents, had not resulted in any harm and were done under the pretense of Eversmile ordering it.

Jake waited a bit around with the King as William seemed to consider what Jake had said about finding his own Path. It took a bit, but Jake didn't feel like he was in a rush considering he was still recuperating from using Arcane Awakening. Was meditating a better use of his time? Probably, but it was also infinitely less entertaining.

"I..." William finally began. "I just fuck everything up..."

"Not going to argue with that one. You do have a pertinacity to fuck things up," Jake agreed snarkily.

"Every time I decide what to do, it just ends up fucked," William began muttering. "The Tutorial was... horrible."

"To be fair," Jake said. "If not for me, you would have probably succeeded. I heard a bit from the Viper about what would have happened if not for me, and things would have turned out infinitely better for you. Not better in the sense that you would have killed the final boss like I did, but way better than getting bitch-slapped into ground paste within your tin can armor."

"Oh, though, I can't say what would have happened after. No one could besides maybe Eversmile, and who knows if he even has a clue? I don't wanna try to figure out what he is trying to do. Trying to understand crazy sounds like an excellent way to waste your time," Jake shrugged.

"Everything in the Tutorial was me..." William said, having registered but clearly not digested Jake's words. "I killed people for barely anything..."

"Why does this human take such issue with ending the lives of his own species?" the King asked Jake but spoke out loud so both could hear it. *"Is it not natural to want to establish dominance over your own kin? To kill them is the ultimate sign of supremacy."*

"Eh, humans aren't as ultra-individualistic as you Unique Lifeforms. We are flock animals, and probably due to evolutionary reasons, we are inherently resistant to killing or seeing those of our own species killed. Establishing dominance over others was usually done in ways that did not cause too great harm. Didn't want your gatherer to have broken hands or be unable to work and all that. Not that humans don't also love killing each other, but we usually do it for greater reasons than simply to prove we are better than someone else. Greater reasons that often end up just being bullshit, but if the flock decides it is acceptable, it becomes acceptable. Those who did kill people for what others would view as trivial reasons were very much ostracized as they posed a danger to the stability of the flock," Jake explained.

Probably not entirely scientifically accurate, but that was at least how Jake had understood things from his social studies and biology classes.

"From my understanding, William here was what we called a psychopath. An inherently broken human without the ability to feel empathy and thus unable to properly integrate and operate within the flock. He could wear a mask and act like a flock member, but it was all an act. When the Tutorial hit, he could finally unleash crazy, and as he didn't feel anything when killing other humans, he could do so easily. In retrospect, being at least a bit of a psycho is probably an advantage in this new world," Jake continued.

Again, Jake was not a psychologist or psychiatrist. The fact he didn't really know the difference between the two should be a dead giveaway of that. The last part was mostly what he understood from his talk with that Ms. Kim lady during the World Congress.

"He then evolved, and with evolution got this little imbalance fixed, making him able to feel empathy and emotions and all that again," Jake finished explaining to the King.

"The more I learn of you humans, the more I realize how flawed of a species you are," the King just scoffed.

"Flawed enough to have kicked your ass," Jake smirked.

"You speak as if you are not also a fundamentally broken human based on your own description. You, too, slaughter your own kin without mercy and dominate them unhesitatingly. Does that not make you as flawed as he was?" the King jabbed at Jake.

"Did I ever argue I wasn't a bit out of the ordinary?" Jake answered, not really caring about the King's judgment in that area. Was Jake a perfectly stable and healthy person mentally? Fuck no, but he also didn't see why he should be. If he wanted to reach abnormal levels of power, being a bit abnormal was only to be expected.

Also, there was this little minor detail of his Bloodline being a thing. If Jake becoming more stable and considered "mentally sound" would result in him hampering his true nature, then what the hell was the point of that? He remembered suppressing himself and it sucked.

Returning to the topic at hand, Jake regarded William.

"Sure, you used to fuck everything up, so just stop doing that," Jake easily advised. "If you don't know how to not fuck shit up, then don't you have some less crazy people around you by now like that Ms. Kim lady? Use her; she seems interested in helping you, so let her. But cut off that asshole Eversmile like the tumor he is."

"What if... Master must have a reason to-"

"Sure he fucking does, but his reason is entirely selfish and clearly not for your good," Jake said, getting a bit tired of how dense William was. Then again, he had undergone years of indoctrination, so maybe it was only natural.

"I can't just..." William muttered again.

"Yes, you can. Take some god damn agency. Look, how about this. Join the next World Congress, no matter what anyone says or does. See if that changes anything," Jake said. "Or, you can just stop chickening out and get rid of it now. Find your own Path. If your Master truly cares, he will reach out when you evolve to C-grade. Shit, shouldn't he be happy if you figure out how to evolve, even if that evolution comes from cutting him off? Sounds like a win-win."

Alright, that logic was a bit flawed, but Jake didn't bother trying to come up with something better. Why would he? His stakes in William "getting better" were low as hell.

He still wasn't even sure why he was helping the kid. *I blame that damn psychologist... or was she a psychiatrist?*

William actually seemed to be considering his words. After thinking a bit, he frowned as if he had detected something. He looked to the side and sighed.

"El'Hakan just left the planet," William said.

"How do you even know tha-

****You have successfully defeated and pushed a higher-leveled enemy Chosen off your planet – A new feat has been accomplished. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 193 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 197 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 194 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 196 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

Jake didn't continue what he was about to say as he stared at the notifications. *What the hell?*

Five damn levels had just randomly landed on his lap, and Jake was confused about what had just happened. Okay, the system explained what had happened, but five levels? Really? Jake hadn't even fought the guy himself.

Shaking his head, Jake knew he would have a conversation with Villy after he was dealing with a certain former psychopath.

"It appears he has," Jake recognized. "But how do you know?"

"Karma," William just said. "Everyone of his subordinates he brought with him are also gone besides the one lying right here and two that managed to hide shortly after coming to Earth. They may also be gone, I don't know."

"How sure are you?" Jake asked with a frown.

"Ell'Hakan does not have the ability to obscure himself from karma like you do..." William muttered.

That is when Jake did realize something. Had Eversmile fucked William in incredibly many ways? Yes... but he had taught him karmic magic in a genuine fashion. Sensing someone powerful, especially someone with a Bloodline like Ell'Hakan, was not easy, but from the sounds of it, William could do so rather effortlessly. Jake also didn't feel like it was just something William was deceived into thinking, considering the system had just confirmed the Chosen was indeed gone. Jake knew Karma was in no way simple either... it was some weird shit.

What is your goal, Eversmile? Jake asked himself once more.

"Well, that is one issue fixed, but it also means I have to get going. The World Congress is in..." Jake trailed off towards the end as he wasn't actually sure.

"Twenty-eight days, four hours, and eighteen minutes, soon to be seventeen," the King spoke.

Jake just looked at the King and shook his head. What a nerd.

"Yeah, in a bit under a month. Go there and see how it feels to not have a god living rent-free in your head," Jake said. "Or better yet, evict that god here and now and renounce your Blessing. I am not going to tell you what to do, but I will give you one warning. I don't care if Eversmile or the entire fucking collective of Primordials ask you to do it: if you mess with my family or friends again, we will have a repeat of the Tutorial. We clear?"

William just nodded a bit meekly, building up the confidence to ask: "What about the nahoom?"

Jake looked at the unconscious alien. "Not like torture has ever worked for shit, and I am not a fan of it anyway. Do with him what you may."

He turned to leave as William spoke again, as much to himself as Jake. "Is this really it?"

Jake turned his head. "What did you expect? I am not your friend, but I don't bother seeing you as an enemy, either. Figure your shit out, and if you want to come after me for revenge after that, then you are more than welcome. Just don't be like that alien fuck and come at me straight."

William did not say anything but just stood silently. He looked up to the sky as Jake summoned his wings again. The King made his intent to follow Jake known as the two of them headed off, leaving William alone with the knocked-out nahoom.

As he flew away, he faintly felt the aura of William change behind him. Jake smiled as he got his second weird notification of the day.

****You have successfully turned a disciple of a Primordial away from their Master, leading them towards the Path of a heretic – A new feat has been accomplished. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 198 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

One more thing also became clear. Jake had really underestimated the weird ways he could level his profession. It turned out doing stuff one would expect of a Heretic-Chosen actually counted. Who would have thought?

Anyway, Jake had the King follow him as they began flying upwards. Jake had wondered if the King didn't need to stay, but he said there was no reason to. Soon the word that the Ashen Phantom Devourer was dead would spread, and as long as it was known he lived, nothing else mattered. The beasts that held doubt would be turned towards the King.

The King also said that sticking around Jake was probably safer during his period of weakness. Which was a good point, as Jake had a feeling that defeating the King here and now would be incredibly easy. His aura was still scary, but it was clearly a front. One that would fool most, but Jake saw right through it. This content belongs to novel**fire**net

As for why they were flying upwards? Well, it hadn't been that long, but Jake needed to get back to Haven, and considering the lack of teleporters available, he went for something nearly equally as good. On second thought, something many would consider superior.

A giant space worm.

Within a house floating through the endless space of an empty part of an unknown universe, a single figure sat and stared out into the nothingness.

Eversmile's smile grew as he felt the Blessing be denounced, and he felt the karmic link change. Several more threads in the tapestry also underwent subtle changes as a cascade effect began. Some of these changes were not as he had predicted, but that was the beauty of an experiment like that. The unpredictability of it all.

The Malefic's Chosen and his dear, now former, disciple were sure to bring him many surprises in the future. Seeing as everything was going as it should, he contacted his mortal associate to let the person know that they were moving on to the next phase of the experiment.

Back in Haven, the entire situation had turned quite lively. The nahoom stationed there had promptly left, and those from the United City Alliance were perplexed. They knew a battle had occurred, but not why it had happened or who was fighting.

So when Miyamoto walked into Haven, they were more than a little taken aback. When only an hour later, a group of people teleported into the plains outside of Haven, things changed even more. This group naturally consisted of Miranda, Neil, Hank, Lillian, and all the others who had gone to the Grand Mangrove River.

That day, it became clear to everyone.

Ell'Hakan had lost, and with that, the United Cities Alliance was about to have a very bad time, and the winds of change were blowing directly against them

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Chapter 557: Towards Haven We Go

Jake and the King didn't really encounter anything of note as they both flew skyward at a relaxed speed. Both were in weakened states, and while Jake was quickly recovering, the King was not. Hence why they took a relaxed approach.

On the way up, Jake infused some energy into the rock that was totally not an egg that he had received from Sandy. It had only been a few hours since they parted, and Jake would lie if it wasn't a bit weird that he was already back again, but it wasn't his fault he sucked at predicting his own future plans.

Okay, it probably was his fault, but in Jake's defense, he had been somewhat mentally occupied with taking down the Ashen Phantom Devourer.

"You mentioned that you made it here with the help of a C-grade entity," the King said as they flew up. "Will this entity be willing to assist both of us?"

About now, it should probably be made clear that Jake had not shared much of how he had traveled across the world, much less talked about Sandy. He just said he had made an ally that could help him traverse the world far faster than by himself, and that was why he had time to strategize and such even while moving forward.

No actual details about Sandy had been shared for several reasons. The primary of which being that Jake just didn't like sharing information about others without

permission. Telling everyone who Sandy was and Sandy's abilities just didn't sit right with him, so he kept things simple.

Moreover, Sandy was not the type of worm that one should be told about. Sandy was the kind of worm one just had to experience.

"I am sure it will be fine," Jake said to the King as they soon reached the layer of clouds Sandy could operate in.

Jake and the King stopped as Jake kept watch to make sure no C-grade decided they looked like prey. Neither was in good condition to have a serious fight, so they would rather just wait for Sandy to make it there.

Ten or so minutes passed before Jake felt an aura approach. Jake looked up and saw Sandy descend from a layer of clouds above the one they were in. Jake smiled, but his smile quickly froze as he felt more auras. Several more auras.

All of them were far more powerful than Sandy's, making them at or near mid-tier C-grade.

"EAT BOTH AND GO!?" Jake heard Sandy's voice yell in his head from afar.

"Yes!" Jake confirmed.

"Don't resist the pull," Jake warned the King, and just in time too.

With great speed, Sandy barreled down and opened their mouth as Jake and the King were gobbled up. Sandy then quickly began flying close to the layer of clouds leading to the lower-leveled region below.

Inside the stomach, the King had stopped to admire what had happened while Jake stared outside. There, far up in the air, several figures now emerged. There were more than a dozen of them, and as they got closer, Jake got a proper look.

It was a group of griffins. Dense wind magic revolved around them as they tried to chase down Sandy, who was flying away at an equally fast pace.

"Sandy..." Jake said. *"Why are they chasing you?"*

He kind of already knew, but he just had to ask anyway.

"Greed is indeed a sad thing. I have personally always believed that sharing is caring. That is the true way of the worms," Sandy said with a holier-than-thought tone.

"You stole something from them?"

"Permanently borrowed sounds nicer," Sandy said with a bit of cheek before promptly changing the subject. *"I barely managed to get in a snack before you came back. What happened, and who is that scary as hell thing you also made me eat?"*

"I am aware you are speaking about me," the King interrupted, being all scary by picking up on them speaking telepathically. *"Incredibly interesting, this place. We appear to be within the Soulshape, and yet at the same time not. Some undefined space, perhaps?"*

"Yeah, I was just about to tell Sandy who you are," Jake said. "Oh, by the way, this is Sandy. Sandy is a friend of mine and also happens to be the Chosen of Snappy. Or, well, the Boundless Hydra, Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper, is probably his official title."

"I see," the King said, not putting much weight on such titles.

Jake proceeded to explain to Sandy what the two of them had been up to and where they were headed. Sandy was only semi-distracted as the griffins managed to pour their magic into their strongest member, making the beast shoot forward with incredible speed, catching up to Sandy.

This resulted in claws scratching Sandy's rock-like skin and a lot of wind magic trying to rip Sandy to threads. This kept on for a while, and the worm began to take damage as Sandy decided it all got a bit too much, activated some skill akin to Jake's One Step, thus teleporting them forward tens of kilometers five times in a row.

I am more surprised Sandy couldn't make a wormhole, Jake joked to himself... fully aware that Sandy potentially could make a wormhole, and even if they couldn't now, then Sandy no doubt would be able to in the future.

During their talk, Sandy managed to get far enough away for the griffins to give up, resulting in the worm once more getting away with a successful robbery. After Jake explained everything, they had some small talk as Jake moved on to the next topic at hand.

Jake had already made Miranda aware the Ashen Phantom Devourer was gone, but he still needed to talk to her and the Sword Saint. He wanted to know what had gone down in Haven and let them know he was coming with post-haste.

The King and Sandy seemed to strike up a conversation as Jake took out a token and infused some energy. He waited for a few minutes, but nothing happened. Jake frowned, wondering what was up. He was not nervous but just guessed that she was probably busy as she also planned on heading straight for Haven once Ell'Hakan was gone.

Instead, he turned his attention towards a certain god he knew had to be waiting for his telepathic phone call.

And he clearly had based on how fast the Viper responded.

"My Chosen comes out victorious in this first chapter of the story, huh?" Villy said. "Though I am more interested in your little interaction with that metal caster."

"I figured," Jake said, also primarily wanting to talk about that. "So, off the cuff, thoughts on what went down? Should I just have killed him?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Villy said. "What I can say is that no matter what you did, there was no winning if you view your true opponent as Eversmile. Because he is not about winning or losing, to begin with. No matter the outcome, it is still a result and thus a data point for him. So, I guess in a sense, you could say he succeeds no matter what, as even no result would still be a result worth noting for him."

"I get that part. Kind of. Eversmile is a maniac, but I don't think he is stupid... why waste so much on William? There must have been easier ways to get someone like him than all the mess he went through," Jake said.

"The metal caster is unique. His state before the system, where his brain itself deviated from the norm, is not something you will ever see with the system present. It simply can't be there, so him being in that state before already makes him interesting. You also misunderstand something... Eversmile's investment is not only due to the caster but who the caster was killed by. The person who just made his former follower into a heretic. You are as much a subject of his experiment as the caster is. And, if I am perfectly honest, so too am I due to our out-of-the-ordinary relationship as Patron and Chosen," Villy explained.

Jake nodded along, once more reaffirming to himself that trying to understand what Eversmile was truly up to was a waste of time.

"Any comments on what else has been going on?" Jake asked.

"Not much; things seemed to go as you wanted. But one piece of advice. Keep your useful relationships intact. I initially wasn't sure if it was even something for you, but Nevermore has a dungeon path that is suited for parties, and seeing as you and quite a few of those around you will reach C-grade around the same time, it seems like an obvious thing to participate in," Villy said. "Besides that, I don't really have much to add. Outside of you potentially understanding why Yip's Chosen went after you and why that is not necessarily a bad thing."

"Definitely did get more out of making him leave than expected," Jake agreed. "Do you think he will keep making problems?"

"Oh, Jake... this was just the first arc of your story. I am sure there is far more to come, and the fact that Yip has not made any moves himself either is proof of this. Better be

prepared to keep dealing with him and others who may want to make trouble for you in the future," Villy said a bit teasingly.

Jake sighed. *"I guess my intentions towards Earth is a good call then?"*

"Depends on what you want out of your home planet, but I would overall say that is the best course of action. One that will also hopefully come with other rewards down the line while also assisting those around you," Villy semi-agreed. "Anyway, I have some stuff to deal with myself to prepare for what is to come. Keep up the good work. Ah, one final note. It should be possible for you to make another teleporter out of your universe quite a bit easier now if you make use of those snakes in the mangrove. One of them has some talent in space magic, so I would look into that."

"Noted," Jake said. "Good luck with whatever you are up to... actually, what are you up to?"

He felt Villy's amusement as the god answered. *"Visiting an old friend and looking into some equipment upgrades of my own. You are not the only one who has gear that has fallen behind. I haven't had a good upgrade in Eras, you know?"*

Jake was a bit surprised, even if he probably shouldn't be. It only made sense that gods also needed equipment and also that Villy could use equipment even if he had been a beast in his mortal days. Ascending to godhood changed things in ways Jake didn't know yet and had no desire to find out. At least not yet. He would figure it out when he became a god himself or at least got a bit closer to godhood.

The two of them casually chatted a bit longer before cutting the connection.

In the real world – Sandy's stomach – the King looked absentminded, likely talking to Sandy. About what, he had no idea, and he didn't want to snoop either. Instead, he entered Serene Soul Meditation and dove into his Soulshape to check up on things. The latest_episodes are on the novel *fire*.net

Miranda had not spent a lot of time around the Sword Saint prior to her return to Haven. She had talked to him quite a lot during this entire planning stage, but that had also been their first real interaction. Everything else she knew about him had been hearsay.

She had feared that when she returned to Haven, there would be some issues, but she soon learned that the old swordsman was as domineering as Jake. Within an hour of their return, the people from the United Cities Alliance had been captured and contained, with those fighting back promptly seeing their heads removed from their shoulders.

This allowed Miranda to go to her old office without having to deal with many other things. When she entered the building, all of the former attendants looked at her with

relief, the city having been rather tumultuous for the last few hours with an old man cleaning house.

Miranda greeted the attendants as Lillian took charge of the former leaders of the Haven, who had, fortunately, all survived this endeavor. In fact, the people from the United City Alliance had not killed a single soul or even caused any real problems besides slowly undermining Phillip, who had been the temporary leader.

Entering her office, Miranda instantly saw the mess of papers. It had clearly been searched through, and no one had bothered to clean it up, not even the man sitting behind the desk.

"Enjoyed being the leader for a little while again?" Miranda asked Phillip, who looked bored out of his mind.

"Thank god you are back," Phillip sighed. "I must admit, for a moment, it was nostalgic, but that is only until I remembered how tedious it could get. At least you are back now, and from what I heard, you have already finished cleaning things up. Ah, speaking of cleaning... you should go look at the cellar later."

Miranda smiled, knowing exactly what was in the cellar. "Things are indeed being restored to how they were. I will go down and look later, but for now, I will need to focus on properly getting a handle on things. Having not been here for so long, I have quite a few issues to deal with, and the system has bombarded me with messages to me as the City Lord."

"Good luck with it all," Phillip said with some schadenfreude. "How about Lord Thayne? Will he be returning too?"

"He is on his way here," Miranda answered as Phillip finally got up from the seat and stretched.

"Good to hear; that means I can finally leave," Phillip smiled. "One thing... Lord Thayne should probably go check with Arnold once he is back. I heard he had several private talks with that orange fellow, and I don't know what they talked about, only that even the United Cities Alliance left him alone. Considering the emotion-affecting Bloodline... I don't like the situation."

"I will let him know," Miranda nodded as she frowned. She had a hard time seeing the man choose to ally with the nahoom... but... it was possible. No one truly understood him, and dependent on what he was offered, it was possible he had changed alliances. She would leave it up to Jake to find out.

"Well then, I will be on my way. I haven't been able to indulge myself for months," Phillip smiled as he waved while heading out of the office. "Say hi to the peacekeepers for me."

Miranda just shook her head as he headed off. He had changed quite a bit after the Myriad Paths event, but he still had the qualifications of a leader. One of the reasons he had been put in charge was because of the peacekeepers of Haven. They were effectively the police force, and most of them were old soldiers from the Fort. Considering the peacekeepers were already respected, she could see how the United Cities Alliance had issues taking control. Though they had made quite some progress.

They still struggled with the Pylon, though. Which was a bit funny, considering the Pylon they had tried to claim was not even the real one. Miranda briefly closed her eyes as her vision shifted to the cellar. Several skeletons were lying down in the cavern beneath the office, with all of the altars from Yalsten still humming with power. The defensive spell she had made before leaving still held strong, and the United Cities Alliance had failed to breach it.

Ell'Hakan could have overpowered it, and maybe his servant would have been able to also, but they had clearly not tried to help. Ell'Hakan had made it clear from the beginning that he did not want them to actually take over Haven and wanted her to keep living. It all made little sense.

The entire invasion had been... weird. And it had ended too abruptly too. This bizarre situation was exactly what they planned to discuss whenever Jake returned.

That, and the future of their planet.

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Chapter 558: Bold Plans

Jake stared at the fight with quite a bit of confusion. Sim-Jake crashed into the chimera and purposefully let himself be flung away. He charged again, but this time attacked while he used some odd version of Shadow Vault. His form seemed almost like it distorted for a moment as he was launched backward.

His other self noticed Jake when he entered and stopped fighting. That is when the second weird thing happened. When he stopped attacking, the chimera also seemed calmer, and even if it still looked aggressive, it no longer mindlessly ran at him.

At least not for a few seconds. Soon enough, hunger overtook it as it tried to eat sim-Jake whole, and his other self responded by making strings of mana like the real Jake and wrapped up the cursed beast.

"Came to take a peek?" sim-Jake asked.

"I got curious," Jake shrugged. "Good progress?"

"Really good. Your timing is also great because I will need you for this next part. At least a good portion of it. No rush, but I think it would be a good idea to practice with me before C-grade for the potential title," sim-Jake said.

"Title?" Jake asked.

"We got one for making a legendary skill in E-grade, right?"

"Yeah?" Jake asked but instantly got it. "You really think you, we, can do that?"

"If my entire Legacy will be a skill, it better be the best fucking one we got," sim-Jake grinned. "Mythical is not easy to reach, but it should be possible... if not, then at least a damn good legendary skill. I have been considering it a lot and even tapped into some memories of your talks with the Malefic Viper. I think we can do it."

It had not at all been a goal of Jake's to make a mythical skill while in D-grade, but it should be possible... shouldn't it? Making one in C-grade would be far harder, but maybe sim-Jake could do it before they evolved? Yeah, if there was one thing Jake never lacked, it was self-confidence, even if that self-confidence was about another version of himself. He believed he could do it.

As for why it was harder to get it in C-grade... well, that should become clear when he evolved. Rarities were not created equal, and each rarity was relative to a grade. This meant that upon evolution, every single skill would be reevaluated by the system. Reevaluated in this case just meaning that a bunch of his skills would probably see themselves downgraded. Not all skills would be downgraded, and some he was sure would keep their rarities, such as the Malefic Viper ones and stuff like Brew Potion, never downgraded.

This entire downgrade thing was more or less a requirement, as, well, it just got easier to make skills when you got stronger. Any S-grade could teleport around, and most could even do some fancy time magic, both of which were considered rather mundane skills for them but would be ancient or higher skills for D-grades. As for why this downgrade only happened in C-grade? Well, because F, E, and D-grade were all considered the lower grades, and the difference between them was not that massive in sheer power, only relative power.

Not that any of this mattered for now; what happened during the C-grade evolution was something for future Jake to think about.

This naturally also meant that the requirements of a skill to be a certain rarity grew. So if Jake could get the Vault skill upgrade in D-grade, it would be best.

"Do you need me right now?" Jake asked sim-Jake.

"Not right now, no. I still need to finish some minor aspects, but you can begin practicing a few things while you are here anyway. Things that will be required," sim-Jake answered.

Jake nodded. He had a few hours at least before he would reach the airspace above Haven, so he had the time.

"What kind of thing do you need me to do?"

Sim-Jake grinned. "Sharing control."

Jake was about to protest as sim-Jake elaborated. "Not to me, but to yourself... how can I say this... to your other self. Think about it, how do we, right now, exist as separate entities yet still share some memories, emotions, and whatnot? You are clearly the primary version, with me a secondary, and I am able to be the carrier of pretty much all Records related to Shadow Vault. What if we keep this separation but also entirely remove it through our merging?"

Sim-Jake sat down and continued.

"A skill's rarity is all about power and complexity. Complexity in both the traditional sense and also when it comes to concepts. What is the most insane concept we have besides things related to our Bloodline? To me, it is my very existence. I exist as the Origin of an entire simulated universe, and the concepts to make me who I am today are something even a Primordial admits he cannot replicate or fully comprehend. So why not at least make some simplistic use of this?"

"Do you think that could actually stop our merging?" Jake asked with a frown.

"Well, fuck no, that would require us to make a Transcendent or something, and no fucking way that is happening. Nah, we will still merge, but the skill will still allow us to tap into the concepts if my plan works out. So, are you up for it?" sim-Jake asked.

Jake considered and smiled. "This sounds insane enough to actually work. Clearly, something I would come up with."

With that, Jake and Sim-Jake began their unorthodox practice as the hours quickly moved by, and soon enough, he found himself mentally poked by a cosmic worm.

"Hello there, we have reached the destination," Sandy said, making Jake wake up.

"Thanks, Sandy; what would I do without you," Jake thanked the large worm.

"Probably have been really slow," Sandy teased him. "By the way, will you stay gone longer this time around? I kinda want to know how far I can move away to find stuff to steal- borrow on unlimited time."

Jake shook his head. *"It will be a while, yes. Lots of stuff to deal with. By the way, I will also likely make a way to leave this universe in not that long of a time... would you want to come along? Back to the Order where your Patron is."* This content belongs to novel.fire.net

"Nah," Sandy answered. "I still got plenty of stuff to eat here first. Maybe later. Though I will probably go by myself or through the egg you car... I mean, will figure it out somehow!"

"Your call," Jake said, not paying the egg business too much mind.

Jake turned and looked at the King. "You ready to head down?"

"Let us," the Unique Lifeform simply answered. He still looked as weak as before, with the masks still cracked all over. He hoped it wouldn't take too long to heal, but he knew it probably would. The King was not overly liberal when it came to sharing exactly how long it would take, but as far as Jake could tell, it didn't actually impact Jake in any way.

Sandy spat them both out as Jake waved off the massive worm who wriggled in goodbye.

"A truly peculiar creature you have helped create," the King said when Sandy was gone.

"Eh, it sounds weird when you put it like that. Sandy has been Sandy even since before the evolution; the only thing that changed is what the worm eats and where they can go," Jake shrugged.

"Your inability to recognize your impact on what is around you astonishes me once again," the King jabbed at him. *"And I have no interest in wasting time on trying to fix that. Your city should be directly below us? In that case, we should stop delaying."*

Jake agreed – with the last part at least – as they both began flying down. He was pretty much back in top form after the rest inside Sandy, even if he did feel a bit mentally drained from the practice during meditation.

The two of them did not encounter anything of note as they exited the last layer of clouds and appeared above the vast forest Haven was placed in the outskirts of. Jake looked towards the depths of said forest and how far it stretched. From up in the air, he had already observed and noticed how the forest extended all the way to the ocean in the far distance.

Will have to properly explore that place at some time, Jake noted to himself as he and the King flew down and entered the forest just above where Haven was. The King mentioned a forcefield of sorts in the surroundings, but he got through it without any issues, something he accredited to being close to Jake. Having some kind of defensive barrier that at least made Miranda aware of everything within was not really a surprise to either of them, but seeing that it was active was evidence to Jake that Miranda was in the city.

Jake quickly located Miranda back in her old office with a brief search using his tracking skill as it was truly intended to be used. He and the King got quite the attention as they landed in the middle of the street in front of the office and entered. None of the peacekeepers got in their way, but Jake got quite a few respectful nods while they just stared at the King who was floating just above the ground like the showoff he was.

In his sphere, he saw that Miranda had also noticed him and gotten up from her desk. Jake decided to wait for her to come, and soon enough, she came down the stairs from her office on the upper floor and greeted him and the King.

"Jake, Fallen King, you made it back faster than expected," she smiled, but her smile soon turned to a frown. "What is wrong with the mask? Did something happen?"

"A temporary issue that time shall alleviate," the King answered, refusing to elaborate further.

"What he said. Nothing to worry about long-term," Jake said. "So, where are we headed?"

Miranda coming down was a clear indication she planned for them to leave the office building.

"Towards your house. The Sword Saint should already be waiting there for us," Miranda answered.

Jake nodded, and without further ado, they all headed out and back to his old home. He would be lying if he said he hadn't missed the place. It had been many months since he had been back, and the old lodge had quite the memories attached to it. Hearing Miranda mention it also let him know that it was still standing, which was a big relief. He could totally see Ell'Hakan or the United Cities Alliance choosing to destroy it just to be dicks. In fact, he had almost expected them to at least wreck his laboratory, but from what Miranda said, that had not happened either, partly because they hadn't known much about it, and if they did know, why would they have bothered?

Sure, Hank and the builders knew, but clearly, it had never been a priority to investigate it, and if they expected Jake to die or at least to leave Earth, why destroy his stuff and not make use of it? Every faction had alchemists, after all.

Walking into the old valley was very nostalgic, but he did see one issue.

"Someone stole all my bananas," Jake commented, annoyed as he saw the time banana-tree-that-was-not-a-tree still there. All the bananas were gone, even if the magic circle left by Mystie was still intact. As for the time musa itself, it had grown a bit since last time, having settled well in the valley.

It did remind Jake of one thing. One worrying thing.

"How about Rick down in the cave?" Jake asked Miranda.

He really hoped no one had made trouble for the troll and the two child trolls while he was gone.

"They are all fine. Ell'Hakan and his ilk clearly had no interest in making trouble for some garden troll, and the United City Alliance quite frankly wouldn't be able to... Rick is close to C-grade by now and swings a mean club. Plus, it would be a PR nightmare as the troll is quite popular with all those who do the dungeon, as he always hands those who enter some small gift. Not to mention the small adorable trolls... killing them would have led to an uproar," Miranda explained with a smile.

Jake nodded with relief. Relief for a moment until he saw something horrific. Within his cabin, a single figure was already waiting while committing a grave sin.

The Sword Saint chilled at a table as a stack of bananas was in front of him with several peels in a bowl beside him. The sense of betrayal Jake felt at that moment was incredible... and he immediately went to confront the old man. Jake surprised the others with a One Step as he reached the steps of the lodge and promptly barged in.

"Lord Thayne, it has-

"Banana thief," Jake interrupted and pointed as he saw the old man had already eaten four of them.

The old man looked confused for a moment before smiling. "I apologize, but I believed it only proper to help myself. You are the one who told me to be more selfish, were you not? Ah, but I can share if you want."

"Well, no, I want Perception-enhancing things. This is just the principle of the entire thing," Jake argued.

"A shame; they are very tasty," the old man smiled. "And rather suitable for me. Very peculiar fruits indeed."

That is when Jake noticed a faint shimmer around the pile of bananas, and he also remembered that they tended to go bad extremely fast after being taken away from the

not-a-tree. It appeared like he had made a small barrier of time magic or something to stabilize it.

"I see you have picked up on some time magic?" Jake asked.

"A few bits and pieces here and there, but I do not focus on it. What time magic I do care about, I keep internal, not external. But as you surely know, it is hard to not pick up on some things passively," the old man explained with a shrug.

Their conversation did not go further as two more figures entered the cabin. The King had to lower himself a bit to get through the door, while Miranda, of course, easily entered.

"Good to see no one messed with the place," Miranda noted, Jake also noticing that it indeed looked to have been left alone.

"It did look like someone searched the place, but I reckon you have nothing of value stored in the cabin?" the Sword Saint asked.

Jake was about to answer no, but then remembered there kinda was something. You know, just the minor little thing called a Pylon of Civilization hidden in a pillar down in the basement. Not like that was something he wanted to share.

"Not anything worth finding for them, at least," Jake just shrugged.

The old man nodded as he turned and looked at the King. The two stared at each other for a few moments, likely having a telepathic conversation of their own, exchanging greetings. That, and a bit more as the King spoke out loud.

"A challenge shall be set forth once I am fully restored," the King spoke out loud.

"It would be my pleasure to learn from you," the Sword Saint bowed in response.

Jake just shook his head. *God damn battle maniacs. Who wants to duel someone the first time they meet? I would never do that!*

Miranda also shook her head, clearly outraged by their behavior. "Alright, boys, be nice now and stop fighting so we can begin."

The two of them listened as the King waved his hand and warped the flooring of the cabin to make a chair for himself. Jake hoped he would put it back in place again once they were done but chose to not comment on it.

"So, are you still planning on moving forward with the current plan at the next World Congress?" Miranda asked Jake.

Jake nodded seriously.

"Yeah, I still plan on becoming World Leader."

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- Chapter 559: World-Tier Preparation

Chapter 559: World-Tier Preparation

Jake becoming the World Leader? Where the hell did that come from? Yeah, definitely not something many people would have predicted, but that was the best cause of action that not only Jake but also the Sword Saint and Miranda landed on. Even the King had agreed it would be the best choice, and it was no decision that had been made half-heartedly.

The problem was that Earth had turned out to be rather special, whether they liked it or not. It was the planet that had likely spawned the most talents of the entire ninety-third universe, making it instantly an object of interest even to powerful beings of the multiverse. Beings who would want to come and study or maybe even seize the planet to try and figure out why.

Special planets were nothing new in the multiverse. Besides Great Planets, which were just so massive it went against any logic, there were planets that were effectively massive natural treasures. Others just had a bigger chance to spawn natural treasures, some had many natural formations on them that led to unique things, and some simply had some undetectable concept that seemed to make all those who came from there more talented.

One such example of a planet was the one Valdemar originated from. It was one only a bit larger than the current Earth but which constantly gave rise to new S-grade talents, with no one truly being able to explain why. The leading theory was that it all boiled down to Records. With it being the planet Valdemar originated from, it only made sense that those who also grew up there would get some innate Records just for being from the same place.

If this theory was true, then Earth was already in a similar situation. Jake, the Sword Saint, Sandy, Caleb, Carmen, Eron, Sylphie, Arnold, Jacob, Casper... there were so many notable figures from their planet. That alone would leave echoes and influence the future of their little rock floating through space.

It wasn't necessarily even that Jake wanted to be World Leader, just that there truly was no other choice. In the short term, sure, it would be fine no matter who was picked, but not in the long term.

That is one place where Arthur had been right. He had recognized that the long term mattered, and Valhal was a good choice of ally due to their track record. What they wanted from Earth was to use it as a recruitment ground as they no doubt recognized the uniqueness of the planet. The management and all that was something they would gladly offload to someone else, especially a native who just wanted to nurture and grow the population. This was further reinforced by Arthur being human and Valhal being a primarily human-focused faction due to its roots.

Any actual leader in charge would have to be strong enough to contest with Valhal, the Holy Church, the Risen, or any other faction of the multiverse. It had to be someone who could, at the very least, force them to the table or make them hesitate before making a move. Someone with backing capable of doing all this... which left options slim.

The Fallen King? He was a Unique Lifeform. He had no Blessing, and his biggest backing was Jake, making it second-hand backing at best.

Miranda? Same deal. The Witches of the Verdant Lagoon were powerful, but not at the level of being able to intimidate other top factions. Her becoming the leader would also effectively force the planet to be part of the Order of the Malefic Viper, which also came with restrictions and rules she did not have a position making her capable of breaking would apply.

The Sword Saint? He didn't want to, and he also lacked the backing. Not in the sense that Aeon Clok, despite his stupid name, wasn't someone powerful enough, but due to him not having a faction of any kind. And, to be honest, he also only had a Divine Blessing, so no one would actually believe that Aeon himself would descend and intervene for one single planet.

Jacob? Yeah, fuck no. The Holy Church was not an organization that Jake would ever be fine with taking charge of Earth.

They had tried time and time again to find someone better, but time and time again, they went back to Jake being the best. As stupid as it sounds, then the second-best option would be Sandy due to their True Blessing, but that was a hard sell.

Even if they wanted to elect someone else like the King... it would be hard. Something Miranda made clear right off the bat was that monsters were very unpopular right now after the many beast attacks in recent months. It was only made worse by the lull before the storm that had been before it, leaving many unprepared and feeling like they had been led behind the light.

They still needed the support of the population, and Jake also still wanted a world where there could be some kind of balance. If someone like Arthur became the leader, it would be one hundred percent human-favored. Jake wanted beasts and monsters to at least have a seat at the table. This led to the second reason why Jake thought him becoming the World Leader was best.

Jake had the ability to tell everyone to fuck off.

Okay, one can argue any leader had this ability, but Jake would be able to do this for one simple reason: he wouldn't actually need to care about the political issues that could result from that. Why not, one might ask? Because he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Him being the World Leader was not synonymous with him actually leading shit; it was just establishing he was the top dog.

The system had shown a tendency to not force Paths upon others. Jake had been the City Owner of Haven since the day he returned to Earth, and the amount of city leading he had done was just transferring all of the responsibility to Miranda.

Jake would essentially just become the World Owner and outsource any actual leading to Miranda. He would still be there as a backer for following system events... which added the third reason why Jake realized becoming World Leader was potentially a good idea.

System events. Jake liked to have autonomy and decide on things himself or, at the very least, have some serious power when it came to making decisions. The World Congress so far had led to two important system events, which had both resulted in titles and a lot of good stuff, and Jake did not want to miss out on that. Villy also thought that becoming World Leader wasn't that big of an issue and ultimately only beneficial if he wanted to keep Earth as his home.

Again, this wasn't only Jake's idea either. Miranda had actually been the first to propose it. Jake's initial plan had been for her to become World Leader, but she had shut it down and even added some extra things Jake had not even considered.

"My entire Path so far, ever since exiting the Tutorial, has revolved around you, Jake. I manage the city for you. I got my Blessing because of you. It would not be an understatement to say that everything I am is due to your existence. If I became World Leader, that would be separate from you, and I am not even sure how well that would work for me. I do not doubt that being World Leader will offer a potential C-grade evolution option, one that would likely be unwise to skip over, and I would not pick that as it would negatively impact me. However, if you become World Leader, we will build upon what we already have, just scaled up from a city to a planet," Miranda explained, the King and Sword Saint both agreeing.

Jake had also been curious how him becoming World Leader would work for the King, but that wasn't a problem either. In all honesty, then the system had probably expected

people to become World Leaders who had no interest in actually leading their world. Jake wasn't even sure Ell'Hakan had the profession of a World Leader based on all he had shown. Maybe some off-shoot or variant, but it being the vanilla version seemed unlikely.

As for if it was actually possible to outsource all this leadership, Miranda had already researched it. She had access to the Verdant Lagoon through her dreaming skill and had managed to discuss with people and find some records. This entire thing with Pylons of Civilization was not new, and people knew what World Leaders were capable of. At least in broad strokes. There were always small differences, but the essence was the same.

What she had learned revealed that the World Leader did indeed not necessarily lead the world. As one would imagine, then a system where the strongest made actual administrative decisions probably wasn't the best form of governance, and in previous Eras, each World Leader could appoint up to five Ministers who would effectively function as depute leaders.

It did not take a genius to figure out their plan from there. Miranda had proposed a council of sorts. Five people were an unequal number, meaning they could handle votes themselves, and then there was, of course, Jake, who would still sit at the top and be able to veto stuff.

Pretty much what Jake would do was just expand his current method of governance from Haven to the entire planet.

As for who should be on this council? The three people in the room besides Jake were a given, but that still meant they needed two more. This was primarily what their meeting was for, in addition to planning the prep work they had to put in during the four or so weeks they had before the Congress.

"For the council, the most essential aspect will be the representation of all interests of value," the King said, getting nods from around the table. "I would not be able to lead humans as they distrust me, and many beasts only respect me due to my power. I can represent many of the monsters, yes, but we will need someone else in addition. I asked Sandy about this on the way here, and the Cosmic Genesis Worm has no interest, so someone else will have to do."

Jake was a bit surprised the King had even asked Sandy, but considering he hadn't known the worm for long, who could blame him? As for who else to pick... Jake had no idea. They discussed this, and Jake did get some ideas for the King to maybe look into.

Anyway, to summarize who they wanted on the council: The Fallen King, Sword Saint, Miranda, some other beast or monster. Finally, there was someone proposed who Jake really did not want to have there. In fact, he had argued many times against it but found himself being shut down at every turn.

"As for the final member, there really is no other option, is there?" Miranda asked, getting a glare from Jake.

"No, it is the best choice," the King agreed.

Jake grumbled and sighed. "I am still not convinced."

Who could this final member be if not the glorious leader of the United Cities Alliance... Arthur.

Even Primordials could not simply teleport anywhere in the multiverse they wanted. While traveling through the void was faster than anything else, it wasn't instant, and established teleportation networks simply couldn't stretch across the distances a god sometimes had to travel. The reason why he had headed out was also simple: he was there to reclaim something that would potentially be useful for what was to come.

Vilastromoz repeatedly teleported as galaxies passed by. He had entered the forty-fourth universe several hours ago and was finally approaching his goal. The closer he got, the more well-protected the planets became. The more familiar signatures of prominent factions, he felt.

The galaxy closest to his goal was nearly overpopulated. Billions of inhabited planets, factions owning entire clusters had grouped there. The Altmar Empire, Automatons, Endless Empire, Valhal, Court of Shadows... no faction that operated on a multiversal scale was missing. Even enemies such as the Risen and the Holy Church coexisted within a relatively small space. At least considered small on a cosmic scale.

As for why all these factions had gathered here? Well, the reason was simple. About fifty billion years ago, a figure had decided to move his Starforge close to there to make use of a natural treasure to power it. A giant star had been born, and the greatest smith of the multiverse had moved to claim it.

The Starseizing Titan, a fellow Primordial.

Vilastromoz saw the figure of his old acquaintance before he even saw this galaxy. He felt the shockwaves of his forge that sent waves throughout this entire part of the universe. Even the nearby galaxy was far away as nothing short of a god could even approach the forge when it was in operation. What celestial objects had been close once upon a time were now nothing more than cosmic dust.

One may ask the reason why he saw his old friend before the galaxy, and for that one, the answer was easy... because he was bigger. Way bigger.

It was well-known that one should never disturb the Starseizing Titan, yet these factions had gods stationed in this galaxy with hopes of having the Starseizing Titan assist them.

It was a bit how Villy used to be hounded by people wanting him to do alchemy for them before he just started killing them for not going through the proper channels.

This well-known rule of not approaching naturally did not count for everyone, and Vilastromoz took a single step as he got closer.

The towering form of the Starseizing Titan filled his entire field of vision. His body had a blueish hue with countless stars glinting within. Even planets were inside, his body large enough to house entire galaxies. It was a form of such size it was nearly incomprehensible, making his title of being the single-largest living entity in the multiverse well-earned.

This size was indeed abnormal and the trait he was most known for outside of his smithing talent. One other thing that made the Starseizing special was that he had been a Unique Lifeform before he became a god. Another thing that made him special, one a bit less known, was that he didn't have a divine realm. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT ***novel•fire●net***

He was his divine realm.

As the Viper got closer, the massive form slowly moved, his actions no faster than that of a regular pre-system human. A massive forge containing millions of stars was in front of him as he wielded a black hammer in his hand, all of it slowly moving as if he was the personification of the cosmos itself.

"Vilas," a voice echoed out through the vast space, the voice alone enough to make nearby planets crumble. **"It has been... long."**

Vilastromoz smiled as he nodded. "That it has. I hope you are doing well. Based on how you seem to have grown a few times in size since the last time I saw you, I reckon you have?"

"The Path is endless," the voice of the Titan answered before taking a long pause. **"I have been well, yes."**

"Glad to hear," the Viper said. "Besides greeting an old friend, I assume you know why I am here?"

The Titan regarded him for a few moments before the Viper felt space warp. The entire universe seemed to collapse for a moment as soon he found himself standing before a figure only about three meters tall. His entire body still looked the same, and in reality, it was the same.

He has improved, Vilastromoz recognized. What the Starseizing Titan did was not space magic... no, the spacial reaction was simply from him shrinking his form. What

the Titan did was far more than that. He condensed his body into a smaller form... losing nothing in the process.

"This is the most delayed a client has ever been," the Starseizing Titan said, his voice far more normal now.

"I was... busy," Vilastromoz excused himself.

"You have nothing to apologize for," the Titan said as he held out his palm. "After I repaired it, every Era, I revisited... and improved it. I felt it grow as you did. It is only right it finally returns to its master."

Vilastromoz smiled as he saw it appear. He felt space slightly shake as it began breaking down, and the Starseizing Titan even took a step back as the staff resonated with its true owner.

"Welcome home, old friend," the Viper spoke as the staff floated over by itself. The staff was simple, looking like a long black snake stretching out and sleeping - the eyes and mouth both closed.

His hand closed around the metallic body as the eyes of the snake opened, and black veins spread throughout the body of the staff as a loud hiss resounded through space.

As a Primordial, was it not only right to have a weapon befitting of one?

A true weapon surpassing even the Divine rarity.

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Chapter 560: Towards A Better Future

Arthur... why Arthur? Jake had seen Arthur once in his life after the system, and he didn't like him. In fact, Jake kind of hated the guy now. Why wouldn't he? All interactions Jake had ever had with him were negative, even the second-hand ones. Moreover, he had been the one who decided that bringing Ell'Hakan to Earth was a good idea, messing things up even further. It was also clear he hated Jake's guts.

Additionally, Jake did not get why Miranda wanted to work with him due to one minor detail.

"Didn't he send a group to assassinate you?" Jake asked Miranda with pursed lips.
"Sounds like a great guy to work with, huh?"

"You speak as if that is simply not him showing he understands the rules of the multiverse. He read the rule book and knew that the Court of Shadows would act as long as he provided funds. He also understood Valhal. That means he is not as stuck in his thoughts as you may believe but can adapt," the King said.

"As weird as it sounds, him not like us is exactly why he is good. The worst thing for a governing body is to have it be filled with yes-men who just do whatever you want. To have no one ever offer an opposing voice. I am firmly in the camp of the Order, and my job is to represent your views. The King will represent his own views and those of monsters while inadvertently also being tied to you. The Sword Saint is also not likely to oppose you and will not be very involved. Finally, a second monster added has a high chance of being on your side too, and sure won't be on the side of humans. As things currently are, the common human population does not have a single person representing them, and we need someone actually willing to present them. Someone who has the guts to. Like it or not, Arthur has shown himself capable and willing to do this, and he is annoyingly efficient at what he does," Miranda explained.

"Sounds all nice and dandy until he tries to start a civil war or some shit to take control," Jake mused.

"Arthur has also shown himself to not be an idiot, and he knows that will not be in the best interest of the citizens of Earth. Giving him a seat at the council will also send a clear message that we are not taking over the planet as the Order of the Malefic Viper but as earthlings. It will also communicate that you are not the type of person to just go and kill anyone who disagrees with you or puts themselves in contrarian positions to you. While some may interpret it as a weakness to "forgive" him, it can also be seen as a strength as you, a Chosen, never truly cared for his petty games. That you don't care enough about him to personally act. In some ways, I also think the best punishment will be to have him fix what mistakes he had made while we make full use of his expertise. Moreover, I think much of his hatred stems from ignorance. He views us as representations of concepts, not as humans, just like him. I believe with time, we can find common ground, and he can become an asset," Miranda further added.

"The man has shown himself to be resourceful so far. Nobody here could have done what he did to make the United Cities Alliance, especially considering his lack of literal power. He got his position in such a short time, not by being stronger than everyone else but by sheer competence. The majority of humanity supports him based on what he has done before, and even in recent months, he has shown his genuine goal with all of the beast attacks. Rather than try and push for anything due to these attacks, he focused solely on alleviating the issue, making smaller response teams and teleportation networks, and stabilizing areas. I highly doubt he had anything to do with these beast attacks, and based on how fast those stationed in Haven gave up after we returned, he also seems to understand when he is in a losing position."

"And you seriously think this dude will just give up?" Jake asked. This part was the one he believed the least.

"Yes, I do. Mark my words, within a week, he will come to Haven and surrender. If he does not come in surrender before the World Congress, then I will take back everything, but I highly doubt that he won't. Arthur truly cares about humanity if his words are to be believed... so giving himself up to try and avoid a downright disaster for the United Cities Alliance would be the wisest choice. He will take the fall for his failure and take responsibility as their leader," Miranda said with conviction.

The King also agreed on this, with the Sword Saint nodding along like it was a given. Jake really felt outnumbered...

He understood why they needed someone from the United Cities Alliance and also kind of understood why it had to be Arthur. As Miranda had explained it, then the man was now stuck between a rock and a hard place. If he kept fighting, the result was already written on the wall, and soon enough, he would find himself slain. Even if he became World Leader, it would be short-lived... and chances are he wouldn't, because even if Jake wouldn't be able to kill Arthur, then he sure as hell could go on a rampage of the ages.

Additionally, he knew that death would also lead to problems. For better or worse, Arthur became the symbol of the United Cities Alliance and the hope of all those who wanted an independent planet that would not become slaves to some insidious higher power. If Jake was to kill him, Arthur would become a martyr and spark a war or, at the very least, an army of fringe terrorist groups.

The only way for Jake to combat this would be a total dictatorship down the line. He would need to rule like the Order and make Earth into something he didn't want it to be. Jake was fine with people disagreeing and not liking him, and trying to control everyone would go against who he was. He also feared he would need to kill millions, if not billions, to try and root out all hidden enemies... which also sounded like something he really didn't want to do.

In the beginning, when Miranda had mentioned Arthur, Jake's gut reaction had been that, of course, the dude was in for an arrow through the temple. Why wouldn't he? But perhaps this gut reaction was why having people like Miranda was necessary.

One had to remember that Jake's gut was not about making decisions that were good for anyone but himself. The reason he wanted to kill Arthur was just to make himself feel better, the future be damned. This chapter is updated by **novel**-fire-net

There was also one thing holding Jake back from going full scorched earth on the United Cities Alliance... one that some people would probably make fun of him for.

What would mom and dad think?

He was a hunter, yes. He could live with them not approving of this, but Jake did not want them to view him as a monster, and if he became the next oppressive dictator of Earth, they sure as hell wouldn't take it well. That thought alone was enough to calm Jake down and make him listen to Miranda.

Again, according to her, Arthur also knew all of these consequences of his death could happen, which was why Miranda believed he would give himself up and officially surrender. He would openly do this, announcing his loss to everyone and making a plea for peace. Knowing full well, especially if he went by the track record of the Order, that what awaited him would be an execution.

So if he actually selflessly came to surrender... Jake could maybe accept him being on the council. Maybe.

"Fine," Jake finally agreed. "If he comes, keep him here. I will be back three days before the Congress to have a talk with him if you are right. I will want to at least talk to him before I give him even the slightest shred of political power."

Miranda smiled and nodded. "That is all I can ask."

"What about the other factions?" he then asked.

"Well, the Court and Valhal are no problem; I already received word from Lillian that both will not interfere in anything going forward and respect you or anyone you choose as the World Leader, even making it clear that should we wish for it, they will leave the planet," Miranda explained. "The Risen are already gone... which truly leaves only the Holy Church as an obstacle worth mentioning."

"With them, I am not budging," Jake made clear.

"I understand and agree. From what I have gathered, the Augur is not even planetside anymore, and it would not surprise me if the Holy Church does as they usually do in these kinds of situations," Miranda said with pursed lips.

This was something that they had also all agreed on from the beginning. No other divine factions. Carmen would not be allowed on the council even if she wanted, not Caleb either, and Casper, if he was still on Earth, would also be barred. The only faction with a claim would be the Order of the Malefic Viper, with Jake as the Chosen telling everyone that it was his home turf.

Having another faction would only complicate that. As for people with independent gods, it wouldn't matter much. Arnold, the Sword Saint, and many others, none of them would be issues to still have around, and the factions like Valhal and the Court would be allowed to remain but fall under Jake's rules like everyone else.

As for what the Holy Church was doing... well, they were doing the usual thing. The Holy Church was a bit unique as a multiversal faction in that they valued numbers a lot, not just to increase the chance of someone with talent appearing, but for their faith. They wanted to retain them more than any other faction, which made their usual tactic when they lost a territorial war the same every time:

Mass exodus.

"From the reports of the Court that your brother so kindly sent over, the Holy Church has made a new vast teleportation network to bring all the faithful back to Sanctdomo. Meanwhile, those who were not an actual part of the faction but just living there were given the harsh choice of joining or getting thrown out the gates. They seemed to have read the writing on the wall that they would not win no matter what. If you won, they would lose, and if Ell'Hakan won, the United Cities Alliance would have also moved to get them out. Their final plan seemed to be to, at the very least, make sure the Risen would not be able to get anything from Earth either," Miranda sighed.

Jake had to be honest... he was all fine with them leaving. Because if they did not, then they had been entirely correct in their assertion that Jake would kick them to the curb and tell them to get fucked. He still considered Jacob a friend, but it was like that kind of friend who you knew was a nice person but had now gotten himself involved in a nasty cult without being able to see it himself. Well, or a friend caught up in a multi-level marketing scam. All Jake would do was hope he saw sense before he went too far down the rabbit hole.

"Let's hope they all fuck off by themselves; if not, we shall do some cleanup after we get the World Leader position," Jake said. After that, there was only a bit more small talk before they agreed to end the meeting.

"You all know my plans, but what will all of you be doing before the Congress?" Jake asked.

He first turned and looked at the Sword Saint as the old man sighed in disappointment before answering.

"I shall head home to those pathetic dregs who dare claim the Noboru name. A solid cleanup shall begin, and the purging will leave us stronger and not as worn down by weakness. I realize that the clan perhaps expanded too quickly and was too dependent on me to hold it together. What I leave behind will be a clan able to stand on its own two legs. I will forever be a member of the clan, but I will officially step down as Patriarch and remain only as a protector," the Sword Saint said frankly. "I will be back for the meeting three days before the Congress."

Jake looked at Miranda. "Don't look at me like I don't have a mountain of work in front of me with a damn mountain range in the distance of even more damn work. In a month, we will literally take over the planet, and I still have the aftermath of your war with

another Chosen to figure out. Oh, and then we expect Arthur to come... yeah, do I need to say more?"

He knew that he had kind of messed up and quickly did the smart thing by looking questioningly at the King.

"We need a final beast. You mentioned this... whale? I shall try and seek it out or maybe try and locate another worthy candidate. I will naturally return for the meeting at hand, but I may not be there three days ahead, and if I do miss it, then we will meet at the Congress. I also need to recover, so I shall take it slow and carefully venture out. In a few days, I should be able to show about eighty percent of my full power again and will head out then."

Jake nodded and smiled. It indeed seemed like everyone had things to deal with. As for Jake? Jake would take this month before the World Congress to do something he should have done a lot earlier and a lot more frequently.

All of this talk of taking over the world and the future of their planet reminded him of his family. Reminded him of the nephew he had only seen for a brief period what was to Jake years ago. It was only right to visit them as Jake decided to take a bit of a break and ground himself before becoming World Leader and making the subsequent push to C-grade.

After the meeting fully concluded, they all split up and went their own ways.

Jake headed out and first made a visit to Arnold. Miranda had seemed concerned about him due to Ell'Hakan apparently wanting to recruit him or something, but when Jake met him, he noticed nothing awry. He even decided to ask if Arnold had joined Ell'Hakan, and his answer had just been that he hadn't. So, that was that. Jake found the entire thing a bit dumb, to begin with. Arnold didn't look like he gave a shit about who took over the planet as long as they left him the fuck alone.

After visiting Arnold, Jake went for a trip down to the cavern and said hi to Rick and the small trolls who were all over level 95 and close to evolution. He kind of hoped they would stay small and cute – small being relative here for trolls – but he knew that wasn't likely considering their large parent.

Rick seemed happy and greeted him handing him some uncommon rarity flowers. So that was nice of him. The cavern had also really changed and was now full of flowers everywhere with paths of grass one could walk through. Rick really liked flowers.

With the troll visit done, he headed out of Haven and took to the plains as he traveled by himself for the first time in a long while. Maybe he would even visit that massive mountain he saw on the way there last time to see what was on the top?

There were also the insect plains, but they would have to wait for now as Jake didn't want to go on an underground hunting trip. That would have to wait.

The entire visit with the trolls and his own plans put him in a good mood, and with a smile, he left Haven as he headed towards Skyggen to spend some quality family time.

Ell'Hakan appeared in the vast library as thousands of books circled around him. He groaned a bit from the severed arm as the concept deployed by the Sword Saint still hurt nearly half an hour later. He realized he had miscalculated... but it had worked out anyway.

"Didn't think to check for Transcendents," a voice echoed as Ell'Hakan felt the pressure, making him take a knee.

"I greet thee, Yip of Yore," Ell'Hakan spoke to his Patron. "It was indeed out of our expectations."

"Those Transcendent bastards have always been incredibly annoying, but even so, the swordsman should not be an issue moving forward," Yip said with a smile as the many books around him had their pages torn out only to fly into a new book, mixing the pages seemingly haphazardly.

"It should not, no," the nahoom agreed. "Everything else went as planned. The native alliance is broken, the Church is abandoning the planet, the Risen are gone, and all other factions seem to have accepted their fates. The Chosen of the Malefic Viper will become World Leader."

Yip smiled. "Good, the first arc has been written with the mighty Chosen of the Malefic Viper beating back the would-be liberator of his home world. Now, it shall fall into the hands of the cruel Chosen, as my Chosen failed to stop him, the same as when I failed to stop the Malefic Viper from destroying and claiming the domain of the Brimstone Hegemon.

"A sad tale indeed, but is it not only to be expected that our heroes fail in the first arc? Only to rise to the occasion and strike back stronger than ever as they slowly build power for that one final confrontation. A final confrontation that shall leave the heroes victorious and the villains dead... giving birth to the greatest legend of all. A Primordial Slayer."

Ell'Hakan smirked, feeling the emotions in the air as Yip's confidence grew. Manipulating the god would be foolishness itself, but he could still at least feel the emotions. For every day, his Patron's power grew - the success of both Chosen and god, linked.

The first arc had some unexpected issues prop up, and many missed opportunities, but overall the result had been achieved.

Their goal had never been to beat the Malefic's Chosen. It had never been to kill him. Why would they want to kill him when they were only D-grades, isolated on a single planet? With such a small audience?

When they could instead expand their battle to be two Chosen World Leaders battling on a galactic scale? To face each other in the cosmos, fighting for the fate of their entire galaxy.

Wouldn't that be a far greater story?

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Chapter 561: A Chill Trip

The journey to Skyggen was one Jake had made before, but this time was far faster in every way. Jake's One Step had upgraded, allowing him to go further than ever before, and he was fast approaching the city. It did help that he also ignored everything in the way... except one thing.

Curiosity had always been one of his strong traits, but the last time he had gone to Skyggen, he had listened to the logical part of his brain. A massive mountain appeared before Jake, one reaching far into the sky above the many layers of clouds. It was bonkers how big it was, and Jake faintly felt a powerful aura from the top. A C-grade aura. Jake had not wanted to go the last time he was there as he was not quite ready to face a C-grade, but this time it should be fine, right?

Right?

Jake rapidly approached the mountain, which only looked bigger the closer he got. It completely put any mountain on Earth to shame, and based on how massive the base was, Jake estimated its height should not be measured in tens but hundreds of kilometers.

Kind of makes sense, Jake thought. The C-grade – or C-grades if there were more than one – had to live far enough up on the mountain due to the system restrictions.

The climb wasn't fast, but it wasn't slow either. By climb, Jake meant running vertically with One Step as he teleported up in the air like he had just unlocked infinite teleporting double-jumps. Soon, he made it ten kilometers up. Then thirty. Fifty. A hundred. this chapter is updated by

For every step, the mountain narrowed a little. When he reached the hundred-kilometer mark, Jake guessed the mountain had to be around three hundred kilometers tall. He did spot many caves also while making his way up and many creatures living on the mountain. Thousands of birds made it their resting place before heading out into the merciless skies again, some of which found themselves hunted by predators lurking on the mountainsides.

None of them paid him any mind, and Jake didn't bother them either. It did not take him long before Jake finally reached the layer of cloud that allowed C-grades, and he instantly felt the shift. The air suddenly turned chilly and white snow covered the mountain. He saw now that the rest of the mountain was covered in white, but more than that, he felt something else there. A presence that seemed to seep into the mana itself.

Curiosity still had hold of him as Jake went to investigate. He flew closer to the mountain and landed as he saw several tracks. Areas where the snow had been disturbed by what looked like a giant claw print.

He kept going forward until he saw a massive cave that seemed to burrow straight into the middle of the mountain. Icicles covered the sides of it, and Jake felt an intense chill coming from within. Enough for him to use a barrier of arcane mana to defend himself from it.

As he stood there, he also felt something from his boots. As he was earthbound, he could detect natural treasures, and from within that cave, a powerful sensation came. Sense of the Malefic Viper did not react, meaning it was not a toxin, but that did not mean it would be useless to him.

Not that Jake thought he could claim it... for he also felt a powerful aura.

Mid-tier C-grade? No... not quite... but still strong, Jake thought. Whatever creature dwelled within also seemed to become aware of him as its presence swept out from within. Jake was ready to retreat as two blue wisps of light lit up within the unnaturally dark cave.

A rumble sounded as he heard the sound of claws scraping stone. Soon, the creature became visible as it slowly walked out of the cavern, the chilly air cooling down as it got closer. Jake knew upon feelings its presence that It was a creature of pure mana. One of the natural masters of magic in the multiverse.

The blue scales covered its body as vapor exited its slightly open mouth. Two claws dragged it forward, each attached to large leathery wings, with two legs being the primary method of moving when not in the air. For some reason, Jake did not feel any fear but only had a stupid smile on his lips from finally meeting one in the wild.

[Northpeak Wyvern – lvl ???]

Wyverns were not dragons, true. But they were the second best. Even a powerful hatchling of a True Dragon often could not match a similarly-leveled evolved wyvern. The reason was simple... the requirements for a reptile to evolve into a wyvern were incredibly strict, and they needed to have insane levels of innate magical talent.

“Your smell is familiar,” a voice echoed out from the wyvern. **“But you are not kin.”**

Jake smiled. “No, I am not. It is a pleasure to-“

“Then die.”

His danger sense exploded as the wyvern opened its mouth. Jake reacted as fast as he could and activated Arcane Awakening and crossed his arms in front of him as several layers of arcane magic appeared. Just in time too.

A chilly wind hit Jake, followed by blue light. To lessen the impact, Jake tried to redirect some of the force as he was shot backward. The arcane barriers froze and shattered one by one as he felt like he was in the middle of a blizzard. Within a second, the final barrier shattered, and the cold energy hit Jake directly. His skin froze, his armor cracked, and he had to close his eyes for them not to freeze solid, the already summoned Scales still managing to absorb most of the force.

Luckily he was also being pushed away at an alarming pace. He flew back rapidly as he summoned a healing potion into his mouth to fight the cold energy that invaded his body and sought to freeze his insides.

Soon, he at least stopped accelerating as the power of the wyvern’s breath dissipated. That just left Jake flying through the air like a comet down toward the ground. The entire front of his body was frozen, and Jake gritted his teeth as he managed to move his frostbitten limbs and brace for impact before he smashed into the ground, creating a large crater.

The cold emanated from his body, even freezing his surroundings. Feeling pretty damn chilly, Jake sat up in the crater, the mountain still visible far in the distance.

“What a rude wyvern,” Jake muttered.

At least he had been hurled in the direction of Skyggen, so could this count as a shortcut? Definitely not, but Jake wanted to justify his curiosity somehow.

Still more than a little miffed at the lack of courtesy from the frost wyvern, Jake got up as his entire body was stiff, and his skin and scales cracked from the frostbite. It was damn annoying, and even with his vital energy working at high speed, it would take some time to eliminate all the frost energy in his body. The breath of a wyvern was far less potent than that of a true dragon, but it still held incredible conceptual power nonetheless.

Moving forward at a slower pace, Jake continued his journey. He complained a bit under his breath and swore: the next time Jake went to that peak, Jake would show that damn wyvern what true rudeness looked like.

Caleb looked down at the sleeping toddler as he smiled. He and Maja had many discussions during the pregnancy on how to deal with a newborn, especially with Caleb working early hours and whatnot as a school teacher. At least that hadn't been an issue considering he no longer needed to sleep at all. Adam did sleep a lot, and according to his mom, relatively normal hours too. At least compared to Caleb.

As a baby and toddler, Jake had been a weird one. Mom talked about how he would always wake up when you entered the room, almost as if he could detect you in the room... something he, in retrospect, clearly had been able to.

"I still feel a bit jealous," Caleb heard his dad, Robert, say from behind. "Back in my day, we had to get up every two hours to a crying baby and soldier through the day on four hours of sleep."

"In all fairness, I am not even getting four hours a week," Caleb smirked.

His dad ignored him with a huff as he looked at Adam sleeping. "I had feared how everything would be for a newborn... but he seems normal. Part of me had thought that maybe kids would grow up to adulthood within a few months or have superpowers, making toddlers even more menacing than before."

Caleb definitely concurred on that one. All of it. He had feared what kind of life a child could have in a life where battle and killing were so common, and perhaps more, how the system would mess with someone growing up.

The system had definitely led to changes for children, but surprisingly enough, it was generally positive. How exactly the status menu of a toddler looked, he couldn't know for good reason, but one thing was clear: their stats did not match their level. At least not their effectiveness.

Adam was already level 3, which meant that by pre-system standards, he should have more stats than a regular adult man. Or at least close. At least he should be far stronger than he was. Okay, he was still stronger than a normal kid, but it was not extreme, so even if he could crawl faster and had quite the grip, it was not at a level where he could lift his own dad off the ground. He did not seem to display any particularly supernatural traits besides one aspect: durability.

It was weird analyzing his own son like that, but he also couldn't ignore reality. Like with any kid, Adam liked to sometimes do less than intelligent things. Things that would usually make a kid cry, such as bumping his head or hitting himself with a toy, he ignored. The few times he managed to scratch himself, the wound would also heal

within the hour. He had also not been sick once, and he needed less food than pre-system children.

Caleb was, needless to say, thankful that the system seemed to have made life for both children and parents easier. No longer did you need to be so fearful of anything and everything going wrong. Parents no longer needed to have several children to ensure some made it to adulthood, and even without medical professionals, children would be fine.

"We are lucky," Caleb just smiled as he looked at Adam sleeping.

He left the room shortly after with his dad, going to the living room. It was only the two of them in the house, and Caleb would have to leave soon, leaving his dad behind to babysit. Yes, even with the system and all that, there was no way he and Maja would leave Adam without a babysitter.

"How is Maja settling in?" Robert asked.

"She is doing well," Caleb smiled. She was spending some time with her own parents these days and had gone a route like many others when it came to figuring out what she wanted to do. Her prior ongoing education in law did not prove the most useful post-system, but she still wanted to at least work somehow tangentially to it, so she had decided that since her husband was a Judge, she should at least do something to help him do his job. Hence why she went into the business of making contracts. System contracts and general administrative work. It was honestly a good thing, as Caleb felt a lot better having someone he could one-hundred percent trust at his back.

The two of them chatted a bit more before dad suddenly seemed to remember: "Didn't you say something about Jake coming by?"

"Yep," Caleb nodded. He had to say Jake was really lucky. Adam being born and everything being so hectic had distracted mom and dad enough for them not to get too annoyed at his lack of contact. Not that Caleb blamed him, Jake was busy and had a lot on his plate already.

"About time," Robert still grumbled.

Caleb just shrugged, there not really being much to say. It was definitely not an argument he was going to try and have again.

"So, when will he come?" Robert followed up.

"Not sure of the exact timeline, but last I heard, he was on his way. I have no idea how fast he is these days or if he has any errands on the way, but it shouldn't be too long," Caleb answered.

Dad just nodded, not talking about it further. Caleb was halfway looking forward to and halfway dreading the talk they would have when Jake arrived. He wasn't sure how it would go after all the stuff with Arthur. Would Jake get mad at the Court for having helped Arthur? Would he get mad at Caleb? Or would he do as he usually did and not really care?

At least Arthur was gone. Last Caleb had heard, he was headed toward Haven to try and do some damage control. An understandable move, as Arthur truly believed Jake was an unhinged maniac who was seconds away from genocide at any moment. The leader of the United Cities Alliance genuinely feared that Jake would go on a rampage and ravage cities in retaliation and hoped to give himself up and lay down his life to appease the monstrous Malefic's Chosen.

It was a stupid thought, but... Jake was hard to understand for people who didn't know him. Everyone seemed to have expectations as to how he was supposed to act and viewed everything he did as something pre-approved by the Malefic Viper, and every action he made only one to further the goals of the Order of the Malefic Viper.

Let's hope things work out, Caleb just sighed as he walked towards his office to finish up some paperwork. He had no idea what Jake was planning but was sure he was about to find out soon.

It ended up taking nearly ten hours before Jake was back to full speed after his wyvern encounter, resolving himself not to annoy moody frost lizards anymore. The cold energy had lingered far longer than expected, and with Palate useless against it, it had been a struggle to eliminate it all. However, when he was at full speed, he made rapid progress, and it did not take long before Jake closed in on Skyggen.

Only after he entered the fake Skyggen did he realize that he could likely have made it a lot faster if he had just figured out what teleporters were functional again and found a city that could take him there.

Earth was rapidly restoring what had been lost, and it should not take long before a new teleportation network was up and running. One that would even be better than the one before as all those responsible for making it had gotten stronger and more skilled in the meantime. Chances are that even areas like the Grand Mangrove River could be passed through by the teleporters with just a bit of tweaking. If not, then it should be possible to make a teleportation checkpoint in the middle.

Shaking his head, Jake did not want to waste time thinking about it as he saw the streets of fake Skyggen and how it barely differed from before. It was evident the beast tides had not reached the city at all, and all that had happened was them expanding as more sought the safety of larger cities.

Remembering the route, Jake passed through the city and went towards the real Skyggen.

It would be good to finally spend some quality family time... and talk to his parents about his plans of quite literally taking over the world.

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Chapter 562: Family Time

Jake was rarely nervous, but on that day, he really was. Logic be damned; he was still a bit afraid his parents wouldn't be okay with him coming, even if Caleb had only ever said they wanted him to. He had to admit that this was one of the reasons he kept trying to avoid going... Jake was very different from before, and with every day, he truly grew further from Jake, a boring salaryman in finance, and into Jake, the hunter. Despite how much he had been assured by Caleb, the nervousness still stayed, making him feel like this was a repeat of their first meeting all over again.

To add on, there was one more element. A person who had looked forward to meeting Jake's parents even more than Jake himself... or, well, equally as much. It was naturally his other self, sim-Jake.

Sim-Jake last saw his parents the day they died. To him, it had been decades, even if he had been able to experience the real Jake's memories. However, as he still maintained an ego, it just wasn't the same. That is why when Jake entered the real Skyggen, he instinctively knew Sim-Jake had stopped his training and was alert and watching.

Who could blame him for being nervous? Both of them? All of this resulted in Jake slowly making his way toward the large residence where Caleb and his parents lived, with his head full of doubt. The guards didn't stop him at all but took out tokens to let him in without even speaking a word, Jake knowing they had been informed of him coming. He hadn't tried to hide this time around, so they all knew he was in Skyggen, meaning there really was no way to back down.

Jake approached the house and saw them within through his sphere. Waiting. He took a deep breath and walked up to the door before knocking. Within the house, mom instantly shot to her feet and rushed towards the door. He was thinking about what to say or how to act as she hastily opened the door and saw him.

In the next moment, Jake realized how dumb he had been.

Without any hesitation, his mom pulled him into a hug. His anxiety washed away as he just returned the hug. Neither of them spoke as he smiled, a well of emotions also coming from within his Soulspace.

He really should visit more.

“How long did you think you could hide it from me?”

The Augur looked out at the vast golden city from atop the spire. A deep frown adorned his face as he felt the changes in the tapestry from the faraway planet. The mix of hope and fear from his home planet reached him even in another universe, proof of his increased power after his evolution.

“Until you discovered it yourself,” the B-grade Bishop answered with a sigh. “I am not foolish enough to think that I can obscure the truth from an Augur for long.”

Jacob’s frown only deepened at the answer. “Why was this necessary? What happened on Earth?”

“Movements and machinations above what we mortals are meant to comprehend. The game of the gods is not ours to interfere with; all we can do is try and make the outcome as acceptable as possible. Yip of Yore, a god recognized as at the pinnacle, challenged the Malefic One, and their battle was extended to also include their Chosen. The Chosen of Yip of Yore invaded your planet with the help of a faction of natives and battled the Malefic’s Chosen. This happened only shortly after you arrived here and recently concluded with the Chosen of Yip abandoning the planet and the Malefic’s Chosen coming out on top,” the Bishop explained, Jacob not sensing a single trace of falsehood in his words.

“Why would all of this require me to leave Earth and come here?” Jacob asked.

“It is not only you. The faithful will all be evacuated from the planet as the Holy Church has decided to abandon it unilaterally. A decision that should not come as a surprise to you, considering the state it was in and the turmoil it faced,” the Bishop answered.

Jacob wanted to protest but truly couldn’t. Deep inside, he had known this would be the conclusion for quite a while. The Holy Church was a monolithic faction that either controlled a planet or didn’t. They had rituals and effectively terraformed planets to be better for themselves and natively spawn holy energy that strengthened the power of faith for all who lived there. Sharing with other factions, especially enemy factions like the Risen, was not an option.

“After the second event, it was obvious that taking control of the entire planet would not be feasible,” the Bishop continued. “Considerations of placing an embassy of sorts there were brought up but ultimately decided against. As things are looking right now, it looks

like the Malefic One's Chosen will end up victorious. Something that I also feel does not come as a surprise," the Bishop said, a hint of accusation in that last part.

They both knew Jacob had been asked to distance himself from Jake and also that he hadn't followed that advice quite as the Church would have hoped. Jacob also knew that the hope, no, expectation, of Jake was that he would leave the planet altogether. There truly was little reason for him to stay from the perspective of the Church, so they assumed he would just teleport to the Order. Something he had done. Except he also kept coming back, and based on how he seemed to have made a home on Earth, it looked like he didn't plan on staying away for good.

"Could you tell me everything that happened in my absence?" Jacob finally asked. While the Bishop had explained the cliff notes, Jacob knew there was more to it. There always was.

The Bishop agreed and told everything without holding back. Jacob had suspected it, but when it was confirmed that his father had been the leader of this native faction, he could only sigh. His sense of helplessness deepened when he learned that the Church had known about this Ell'Hakan coming well ahead of time and had even been warned, hence sending Jacob away beforehand. They had indeed planned on leaving Earth all along and just wanted the Risen gone, too, something Jacob would have been an obstacle to accomplishing. Which begged the question...

"How exactly do you expect me to respond to all this?" Jacob asked.

"I expect nothing; I am nothing more than an instrument of a greater will. What I will say is that I personally question why you believe you have been slighted. You stand here now at C-grade, a multiverse in front of you, the blessing of the Holy Mother upon your soul and the Church at your back, and you care about a small insignificant planet. The reach of the Holy Church is boundless, and there are numerous places that can benefit from an Augur of Hope. Numerous places for you to exert your Path. Could you truly guide Earth towards a feasible Path with so many elements on it to lead it astray? Your planet was corrupted beyond saving already the moment the Chosen of the Malefic One chose to stay there. All you can do now is look onward," the Bishop said.

"And how do you expect me to do that?" Jacob asked further.

"Explore. You have barely seen anything of the multiverse yet; it is a ripe time to see what it has to offer. Leave Earth behind you. Perhaps the system will still offer you to return for events, but if not, then simply close that chapter of your life. People need help and guidance everywhere. People need hope everywhere. With time, I believe you will come to understand that no one has tried to slight or betray you. They simply guided you as you now guide others. Towards a better future," the Bishop finished saying, leaving Jacob alone with his thoughts.

Days passed by as Jake did something he hadn't done in a long time – absolutely nothing. He just relaxed with his family, played with his little nephew, and went around Skyggen exploring. Okay, Jake did do a bit of light work, but it was only reading, meditating, and helping Caleb out with some minor stuff. During meditation, Jake began working more with sim-Jake, but both of them dedicated most of their attention to their holiday. He had even made it clear to Miranda that he was only to be contacted in the case of an emergency, and Villy seemed to get the idea and didn't pop into his head a single time throughout this time.

Jake naturally also discussed recent events with Caleb and his parents. Everything with Ell'Hakan and Arthur had made quite the ruckus, and especially Caleb had seemed nervous Jake would get mad at him for the whole assassination thing. Jake didn't know why... it wasn't like his little brother killed anyone Jake knew, and while it did indirectly help an "enemy," Jake couldn't exactly get mad every time his brother took a job. It would be like if he got mad that his brother went to buy potions from someone else, as that would hurt Jake's financials.

As for the big subject of Jake's future plans... it felt like his parents didn't really understand it. They understood the words when Jake said he would become World Leader, but it didn't really seem to sink in. It was a bit like how they didn't entirely get what it meant that he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper or really understood the multiverse and the powerful factions in it.

For the most part, Jake got it. The scale of things had gotten ridiculous. Gods who could crush entire galaxies with ease were mentioned as if normal, and factions with trillions upon trillions of members with countless planets were just things thrown out there. It didn't really make any sense to most people as it was too far removed from their everyday lives, so Jake didn't push it either. They didn't need to really understand... and in a way, taking control of Earth was a way of ensuring they didn't have to.

Or, maybe they did know and just didn't want to make a big deal out of it. In either case, it was probably for the best, as it allowed Jake to just be himself. For better or worse. Both he and his brother knew that even if his parents and Maja had reached D-grade, the chances of them reaching C-grade were near nil.

It was another thing Jake didn't want to think too much about. What he did like to think about was the last member of the little family.

Adam, his nephew, had proved himself to be a big fan of his uncle. Who could blame him? He seemed especially interested in Jake's mana strings, and while Maja wasn't keen on it, she allowed Jake to make a swing of pure, stable, arcane mana. The moving parts were a bit tough, but he got it working pretty damn quickly and rapidly expanded - from a swing to a slide to a makeshift rollercoaster to whatever else Jake could get on.

No, this was not practicing; this was playing. Did it also happen to be good practice? Yes, but that was a happy little coincidence.

A month seemed like a long time, but the weeks passed by faster than Jake had expected. Before long, it was the evening before Jake would have to head back to Haven, and they had all met up for a final dinner together. None of them really had to eat – besides Adam – but that didn't mean one couldn't enjoy a good family dinner.

With the table set and a homecooked meal steaming, it began. They had tried to avoid certain topics during most of this time – topics delegated as work topics – but as this was the last night, all topics were valid. So, naturally, the conversation fell on what Jake wanted to do after he left.

"I heard you are planning on leaving and going to that Order again soon," Robert, his dad, stated.

"Probably," Jake nodded as his mom began mounting food on his plate. "I have something I want to do there before the evolution."

"Oh?" his mom asked. "Is it related to that alchemy of yours?"

"Nah. It's this dungeon with a hydra in it. I can fight the strongest D-grade version as long as I go there before I evolve. I lost the first time around and want a rematch," Jake said with a smile.

"You lost?" Caleb said with a cheeky grin. "Damn, I didn't know you could even do that. What did it do, eat all your arrows or something?"

"That is exactly what it did," Jake answered with a deadpan expression.

His mom gave him a look to make him stop teasing Caleb, but Jake doubled down. "What? It did eat everything. Arrows, magic, even my poison."

Caleb turned a bit more serious as he inquired: "Sounds like quite the beast. A strong variant?"

"Yep," Jake said as he took a bite of the food that his mom had just handed him. "This hydra later became a god too."

Frowning, Caleb thought for a moment. "Wait, the Lord Protector of the Order? The Boundless Hydra? It has an image saved in a dungeon?"

"Right on," Jake confirmed.

"Boys, enough hydra talk," Maja finally cut in. Jake looked a bit apologetic, with Caleb naturally obliging with the words of his wife. It was a bit rude to talk about something only the two of them really knew and cared about.

They stopped discussing anything serious for a while as they just talked about causal topics. Primarily a trip Jake and Caleb made where Jake “borrowed” some more special alchemical ingredients from the Court of Shadows and, in turn, was made to help teach some alchemists. When Jake said talked, what he actually meant was that Caleb joked about how much Jake sucked at teaching people. Which wasn’t really fair.

It wasn’t Jake’s fault all of the alchemists in the Court were morons who didn’t put enough points into Perception to actually understand what was going on. They went on and on about methodology while Jake just kept telling them to just *look* at what the hell they were doing rather than just assume everything went according to theory. Something it turns out they couldn’t do because apparently Wisdom and Willpower were more important stats when it came to alchemy.

He could only shake his head at their ignorance, which his family only found amusing.

At least he did manage to teach them at least a little about poisons. Mainly things he felt were rather basic knowledge, but it seemed like him explaining it made them understand it better than if they read it. Jake wrote that up to his legendary teaching skill. Caleb was happy either way, as they both knew Caleb just wanted to have Jake teach to truly show off that there were no hard feelings between the Order and the Court. And Records. Probably some stuff related to Records too.

The dinner ended far too soon, and it was time for Jake to go. Everyone insisted on escorting him to the city exit, and it didn’t take them long to get there. Jake said goodbye to Caleb, Maja, and Adam before turning to his parents.

His mom gave him a big hug that went on for a bit too long, followed by his dad even giving a brisk one. Mom had tears in her eyes, but she didn’t say anything so as to not make Jake feel bad about leaving. They both knew he had to go.

Jake walked out of the hidden city gate as his dad followed him, with Caleb leading everyone else inside again. The two of them stopped a bit outside the city with no one else around. Robert turned to Jake with a serious look on his face. One Jake had only rarely seen on his father’s face.

“Jake... Debra and I won’t begin to act like we understand everything that is going on with you. I get some of it, but I will admit I have given up trying to fully understand what both you and Caleb are doing and how the world has changed. What I do understand is that you have important things you want and need to do. If there is one thing your mother and I would never want, it is to feel like you are restraining yourself because of us. So please, just do what you have to do. Just know that no matter what happens, we are proud of you, and you can always come to visit... but you don’t need to. You don’t have to hold yourself back because of us; we will be fine.”

They smiled at each other as his dad tapped his shoulder.

“Take care out there.”

Jake smiled and pulled his dad into a hug that lasted quite a bit longer than the last one. Letting go of him, Jake took a step back. “Thanks, dad.”

His dad just nodded. “Now be off.”

Jake nodded again and turned to leave.

“Be safe,” Jake muttered under his breath as he took off, his dad staring after him as he left – Jake also feeling the gazes of the rest of his family from afar. This chapter is updated by **novel•fire•net**

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Webtoon Announcement

In case you are not on Discord and missed it: I GOT A WEBCOMIC.

Or, well, I will get a webcomic sometimes this year. Not super much info to share quite yet, but I am at the very least excited, so do the proper thing and, at the very least, act excited for me, alright?

It is made in partnership with my publisher (Aethon) and Webtoon, and it will be a Webtoon Original. In case you didn't know, Webtoon is the biggest online digital comic platform in the world and the ones behind stories such as Tower of God. So, not bad company if I say so myself.

More info here: <https://aethonbooks.com/2023/01/18/aethon-partners-with-webtoon-for-origincomic-adaptations/> NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON **novel*fire*net**

As I said, then there really isn't much to share yet, but I have talked to the people behind it, seen some stuff, given feedback, and it looks good so far! I will of course update everyone once I know more, and especially when I have some actual artwork to share.

Oh, and have a good weekend, everyone!

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Intermission 8/10 - Arthur

Arthur wondered where it had all gone so wrong, but the answer was obvious, wasn't it?

It had been the moment he had agreed to the offer of that other Chosen, a choice he still questioned to this day. Why had he believed his lies and the blatant deceit? Missed all the red flags? Well, he knew why... because he had wanted to trust him.

Like every other human on Earth, Arthur had entered a Tutorial, a quite difficult one as far as he could gather. Survival had been the goal, and after the initial panic, he had calmed down. He had entered with several employees and his youngest son, Peter, so in some ways, he had an advantage. They had all put their faith in him, and as always, he had risen to the occasion out of a sense of obligation. There had been a total of two thousand individuals, and with Arthur at the helm, less than a hundred had ended up dying within the first month, the majority on the first day before they gathered them. He had done all he could... but even in the Tutorial, outside influence had begun to rear its ugly head.

Invitations during evolutions, dungeons made by those who had designs on their new universe. Some people had been convinced, and even Arthur had been close. The offers of the gods sounded genuine, and it seemed like a win-win.

It wasn't. There was no equal deal, no give and take... it was an as unbalanced relationship as they could come. Nearly all the gods who had blessed people wanted them to convert others. Some gods even were antagonistic towards others, and the leaders of man clearly did not enter the eyes of the gods. The battle for influence was mostly peaceful, but deadly duels began to pop up

A Tutorial that was mostly under control began to turn chaotic. Especially two gods held great hatred for each other and decided to wage war by proxy – something Arthur came to learn was rather common practice. Why wouldn't it be?

To gods, mortals were nothing more than playthings. They saw no reason to take any risks themselves when they could just have their ignorant followers die in their stead, like chess pieces in a game where neither player truly cared about winning – just spiting their opponent.

That was the first time Arthur learned to crack down and be assertive. The gods had no tangible power in the Tutorial, and Arthur still had many followers. The majority also soon adopted his sentiment of distaste towards these religious factions, spurred on by their senseless violence and disruptions of what actually mattered, at least according to most reasonable people.

The Tutorial was about survival, and this manifested in frequent attacks by beasts and elementals. Once the religious factions' conflicts began to result in casualties among the defenders, it didn't take long before the majority was on Arthur's side.

He didn't like to do it, but some of them had to go. It was better to cut off the tumor before it could spread. They threw them out of their settlements into a wilderness where these "priests" and "preachers" quickly fell to the invaders, their followers not devout enough to follow them to their deaths. Many who had gotten blessed renounced them and denounced their former Patrons.

From there, Arthur ruled with an iron fist. He got a lie detection skill early on, and his Identify evolved to also include if people had a Blessing or not. It did not say who or what they were blessed by, only if they had one or not. This naturally proved instrumental in weeding out those who tried to hide their loyalties and tried to spread conflict.

It had to be noted that Arthur, not even at the height of his hatred of divine influence, went indiscriminately against those with Blessings. Some were blessed but never voiced anything. Never tried to recruit anyone or make trouble. Arthur saw no reason to shun these people and simply acted like nothing was different about them. Even some of his closest allies carried Blessings of gods who didn't care about spreading their faith and growing a faction. From them, he learned many important things.

Firstly: all gods benefit from faith, but some more than others. Some benefitted so little that it didn't matter at all. These gods, Arthur had no issues with. More than Patron gods, they were just personal sponsors and guides. He would compare them to people who identified as spiritual but didn't view themselves as part of any organized religion. They also didn't tend to believe that their religious beliefs mattered more than the beliefs of others.

The second thing he learned was that the gods who did benefit from faith were very aggressive when it came to getting it. While they were clearly not monotheistic, they still believed that all those within a group should act as if they were, only recognizing their Patron as the most important god. It was fine agreeing there were others, but they had to be viewed as lesser.

This was simply a requirement for them. A mechanic of the system itself. How exactly faith worked, he never quite figured out, but it was clear that people who believed in multiple gods were worth far less than those who truly believed in only one. There was a caveat to this as it appeared that gods in Pantheons did not suffer this penalty, truly giving birth to large organized religions.

Thirdly, Arthur learned the existence of different levels of Blessings. Those blessed were far from equal, and each rank of Blessing offered more benefits and more Records. The cost for the god of giving away higher-leveled Blessings also grew, meaning the higher level of the Blessing, the more devout the person tended to be.

Minor, Lesser, Intermediate, Major, Greater, Divine. These were the Blessings he first heard of, but later it was revealed there were two more.

Baptism was not truly a Blessing but more a brand of sorts. It did not truly offer anything, and as far as Arthur could determine, it was only used by the mega-religion known as the Holy Church. Finally, there was one more that was also hard to argue was a normal Blessing: the True Blessing.

True Blessings were something truly Unique. First of all, a god could only have one True Blessing given out at a time, and often, a god didn't even have someone who carried it. The ones with the True Blessing were called Chosen, but others also referred to them as Prophets or Champions. They were effectively the mortal mouthpieces of their gods.

Arthur never encountered any Chosen before the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Chosen of Yip of Yore. But everything he had seen pointed to the same reality: the higher the level of Blessing, the more devout the person. Ell'Hakan struck Arthur as a miniature version of his own Patron, and he shared much of the insight Arthur came to have about what it meant to be a Chosen and what the Order of the Malefic Viper was all about. Insights he now questioned the accuracy of.

Why had he believed Ell'Hakan? Even now, Arthur wasn't sure. The man had just seemed like someone he could trust, and everything the nahoom had said made sense to Arthur. His logic was sound, and he even had evidence of all his claims. He now doubted all of this as it was clear that while Arthur attempted to use Ell'Hakan to remove a major threat from their planet, Ell'Hakan had also just used him as an instrument to further his own goals.

But... as mentioned... Arthur had believed Ell'Hakan because he wanted to. But in his defense, his biases were confirmed time and time again. The source of this content is ***novel•fire•net***

Everything he had done was, at least in his own mind, for humanity, and every step of the way, he was affirmed in his beliefs. Peter had even agreed to infiltrate the Holy Church in order to try and get to Jacob, but during that infiltration, he had found out how truly messed up the so-called holy faction was.

Arthur had even considered joining the Church at one point, especially when he learned his son was leading it. Jacob had always been excellent at everything he put his mind to, and Arthur trusted his judgment... at least, he used to. Now, Arthur wasn't so sure.

What he learned from the Church was everything in the Tutorial taken to the extreme. While it was not explicitly stated, the City Lords who tried to negotiate with the Church quickly realized what the goal of the Church was: total domination. They would not allow any other faction to remain on Earth and were more than willing to commit genocide of both their own people and the locals to achieve this. Did they prefer peaceful methods

to preserve as many potential faithful as possible? Perhaps... but that wasn't the kind of future Arthur wanted for Earth.

It would also result in the death of Earth, at least in the metaphorical sense. They would wipe out the culture of Earthlings and replace it with that of the Holy Church. The values humanity had built up throughout history would be forgotten. In a few generations, those who lived on Earth wouldn't even remember what Earth used to be. The history of their homeland would be lost forever.

Arthur could not allow that to happen. But, as he was trying to figure out a way to battle the Holy Church, he came to find an even worse fate for humanity than what the Church would bring. One caused by a faction far more destructive, cruel, and bereft of empathy:

The Order of the Malefic Viper.

When he first heard about them, he found it hard to believe. As mentioned, he had many who worked with him who still had Patrons who had no interest in laying a claim on Earth. They told him what was going on in the wider multiverse, with the two biggest events being the integration of the ninety-third universe and the reemergence of the Malefic Viper. Two events he came to learn were connected once he knew of the presence of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper...

The Prophet of the Malefic Viper. His Champion. Mouthpiece. The mortal avatar of a god that had Malefic in its very name. A god known for his cruelty and slaughter of ten percent of an entire universe. An utterly monstrous existence that now had laid its hands on Earth. The Chosen had laid his hands on Earth.

Now, why did Arthur think he had an interest in Earth? Everything pointed to it.

The Order of the Malefic Viper had begun expanding in the first universe. Their methods of expansion were ones that reflected the cruelty of their Patron. Slaughter, enslavement, destruction. No mercy was shown on their path to conquest, and any who dared stand in their way or even try to negotiate were killed unceremoniously, their entire factions implicated.

Horror set in as Arthur feared the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had similar plans, but he had one hope: that he wouldn't care about Earth. Maybe he would simply leave and head off to the Order, leaving behind their small rock in space? That hope died quickly after Arthur learned that the Chosen had not only taken part in the First World Congress but was even the one with the highest noble rank and held significant sway over every vote. It would not be wrong to say he ruled the World Congress already.

The Second World Congress and Auction Event only reaffirmed what Arthur thought. He tried to get a feeling for the individual that was known as Jake Thayne but found it impossible. He was too aloof, too carefree about anything political. But that didn't mean he lacked a presence in the political arena because he had two individuals at his back.

Firstly was Miranda Wells.

From all he could gather, she was a nobody before the system. Not surprisingly, most people who were now prominent were not known before the system. He did find a large percentage of City Leaders and faction leaders to also have been leaders in the old world, but Ms. Wells was not such an example. From what he did learn, then she was just a manager or something before the system.

Perhaps there would have been hope with her, but she was clearly also a member of this Order. She was blessed by witches and was a witch herself. Those who got to see her in action during the Treasure Hunt reported that she used brutal tactics and magic to kill her foes. The level of trust the Chosen showed in her was also high, making it only reasonable to assume she was absolutely loyal. Hence Arthur was certain the City Lord had to go to destroy the supporters behind the Malefic's Chosen. After his death to Ell'Hakan, they would shamble, and he saw Ms. Wells as the only person able to hold anything resembling a faction together. At least the humans in the faction. Because there was one entity even more dangerous.

The Fallen King.

Upon seeing the Unique Lifeform in the Second World Congress, Arthur felt like many of the chess pieces fell into place. A King by birth, a creature created to lead and rule. To Arthur, that was why the Chosen had never bothered to expand his faction. Why would he when he had such a creature at his back to do it all for him?

To make it all worse, this Unique Lifeform could lead even monsters under his banner. This was why Arthur decided that he had to do something. Why he, in his desperation, listened to the sweet whispers of an enemy Chosen who knew just what to say. He had been approached during the Myriad Paths event, and the offer he was given was just too good to refuse. Arthur had, in all honesty, been desperate by how badly he was outmatched, so when he was thrown a lifeline, he grasped it with both hands.

Ell'Hakan would take care of the Chosen and the Unique Lifeform, and he even presented the potential of allying with Valhal, something his Patron had pre-negotiated for them. Valhal was a force that Arthur had no problems with, as they did not want to control the planet. Moreover, they were a predominately human faction, and the contract he negotiated with them was incredibly favorable towards Earth. All contingent on the defeat of the Chosen, of course...

Arthur sighed as he was awoken from his thoughts by one of his old employees. They were riding a magical ship, and he had been made aware that Haven was now within sight. Steeling himself, Arthur was prepared to face what was to happen.

A captain had to go down with the ship, and as the leader of the United Cities Alliance, he had to take responsibility for his actions. From the very beginning, he had been resolved to follow through or die in the attempt.

It was only four days past the defeat of Ell'Hakan, and Arthur had not been made aware of the Order of the Malefic Viper making any moves yet. He hoped that they wouldn't before he had a chance to give himself up.

Their approach was naturally spotted, and Arthur sighed as he prepared himself. He had only gone with three of his most loyal attendants, and he hoped that mercy would at least be shown to them, though he wouldn't get his hopes up. They had also prepared themselves to face death.

An advance party from Haven moved towards them as Arthur had the ship stop. He saw that the group included the assistant of Ms. Wells, Lillian, as well as the resident space mage of Haven. The space mage alone was strong enough to beat everyone on the ship.

Lillian landed on the ship and regarded Arthur. She didn't speak right away but took out a token, nodded, and motioned toward the city. "Welcome to Haven; the City Lord is expecting you in the central office. If you would follow me."

Arthur nodded, a bit surprised they didn't put any magical restriction or something like that on him quite yet.

"Your followers can wait on the ship in the meanwhile," Lillian followed up.

He couldn't really argue with that... it was safer to only bring him and split them up.

"Finally, what do you prefer for the meeting?" Lillian asked, Arthur frowning with confusion before she continued. "We have coffee and tea, but if you prefer something else, we can get that too."

Arthur stared at the woman, confused. A sneaking suspicion entered his mind... had he misread the situation?

And if he had... how badly?

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Chapter 563: More To The Story

Getting back to Haven was quite a bit easier than going to Skyggen. A month was not a long time, but it was enough for many changes to happen. Earth's space mages had been working tirelessly, and the teleportation network expanded by the day. All the

factions that remained were busy claiming what they could, especially after the Holy Church decided to effectively abandon the planet, resulting in the second biggest faction suddenly being gone.

The United Cities Alliance had clearly known of this outcome and already had people in place to take control. They did proceed with the plan of the takeover, but their loyalties to the Alliance were now in question as they all were also made aware of their failed overall plan. Which begged the question: what would happen now?

Jake had talked with Caleb about current events, and he at least had to give these City Lords credit. Their response had simply been to do their jobs as best they could and act as neutral forces. They invited everyone to make teleportation circles, and they prioritized their citizens over petty politics and focused on rebuilding and ensuring public order after all the beast attacks. That was pretty damn respectable and made Jake feel a bit better about what was to come.

For the final stretch back to Haven from the Fort, Jake still had to run. He decided to be nice and not rush, as they were now aware of his arrival back in Haven and could prepare stuff. A bit to his surprise, something unexpected contacted him on the way.

"Had a nice vacation?" Villy asked after the deity descended with his presence.

"I know you peeked in at me pretty much all the time, so you tell me?" Jake asked in return.

"In my defense, I wasn't really paying attention. Think of it more as me having a security camera on you where I can pull up the footage if I actually want to see something. Anyway, you had a good vacation, and now it is back to work, which is why I pulled you into a fast meeting. What are your plans with Valhal?" Villy asked.

"Not thought much about it, but I am a bit pissed at them for making a deal that is pretty much contingent on my death. Arthur, I can excuse for being ignorant and getting fooled by Ell'Hakan or whatever, but Valhal? Nah, fuck that; they did it with full knowledge. So something has to give, that is for sure, be it telling them to get the fuck out or demanding some kind of hefty compensation for being assholes," Jake said, a bit miffed.

"Okay, allow me to offer an alternative. Don't. I won't share much, but I will say that things aren't quite as they seem. Valhal is a good ally to have and a beneficial force to keep on Earth. The entire thing with Yip's Chosen is also far more complicated than you know, and again, while I won't share much, then you hit it right on the money when you said they went in with full knowledge. Including the knowledge that the contract would never materialize and become relevant," Villy said, making Jake frown.

"Explain," Jake simply said.

"I can't; that would potentially ruin future plans. Some things are simply best left unsaid. But know that Valhal never actually saw you losing as an option. They are allies, and it would be best to keep them as allies," Villy answered, refusing to give an actual reason.

However, Jake frowned with suspicion. *"You were involved in them even making the offer, weren't you? What are you up to?"*

"Things. We are playing a long game here, and some things will only make sense in due time. For now, just keep positive. Shit, if you want to excuse your sudden sense of forgiveness, just blame it on the Runemaiden. Wait, maybe you can demand to make her your mistress to-"

"Okay, bye!" Jake cut Villy off as he severed the connecting, a faint echo of a laugh still left behind as Villy clearly enjoyed teasing him.

He knew it was just a method to make Jake not discuss the topic any longer. Jake honestly had no idea what the hell Villy was doing or what he planned, but his gut told him it wasn't anything that would impact Jake negatively. He was aware that things between gods were rarely simple and that something bigger was brewing than just Yip and the Viper deciding to duke it out in a straight-on fight, so he decided to play along for now and be a good Chosen. While potentially using it as something to hold over Villy's head. He was still a heretic, right?

With all that done, Jake finally made his way into Haven proper. He had already felt Miranda observing him on his trip, not that he didn't expect her and everyone else to know about his arrival. As he got closer to the city, he also felt more powerful presences, making it clear he was the last to arrive.

The Sword Saint and Fallen King were already there. He had kind of assumed at least one of them to be late due to all the things they had to deal with during this month. Both had territories to stabilize and take control of once more, and while Jake had gotten some updates, he wasn't entirely clear on how things were looking elsewhere on Earth. Primarily because he didn't really care much and didn't wanna ruin his vacation by hearing how the rest of the world was potentially in turmoil.

Jake headed straight for the office, where all the others had already gathered. The King, Miranda, Sword Saint, Lillian, and of course, Arthur. Jake saw them through his sphere before he entered the office, and it was quite the sight, especially with how overly stoic Arthur looked. However, it at least looked like the man wasn't too uncomfortable. Jake would hope not. He had been in Haven for weeks already, so he should have had plenty of time for Miranda to set him straight.

Entering the large meeting room, everyone turned to him.

"You are late in your arrival," the King said with a bit of snark. The Unique Lifeform felt a lot better than a month ago, and the many cracks in both masks were close to healed.

Jake's own mask naturally reflected the healing of the Fallen King in front of him, but he hadn't really followed the mask regenerating during his break. Most of the time, he hadn't worn the mask, as that had been unnecessary.

"I didn't know we agreed to meet at midnight," Jake answered back. "I apologize for assuming we would meet at reasonable hours."

"For the record," Miranda intervened. "The Fallen King is the only one complaining. I am personally surprised you even showed up this early. I would have expected you to come a few minutes before midnight tonight to barely meet the meet-three-days-before-World-Congress deadline."

"Okay, I am starting to feel attacked here," Jake said with a smirk. He met Miranda's eyes and knew what she was doing. Humanization. She was trying to show that Jake was a normal person in front of Arthur by treating him casually and friendly. Jake didn't think the King was in on it; he was just being a dick with Miranda then proceeding to make use of his dickishness.

"Who would have thought that previous history would be used as a predictor of future behavior," Miranda smiled. "Anyway, good to have you join us, Jake. You aren't actually that late; Lord Noboru arrived only an hour or so ago."

"The lateness of one does not excuse the tardiness of another," the King once more interjected.

"Or maybe you were just early. This is my meeting, so it begins when I arrive. Not my fault you decided to misread when I would come," Jake just answered, not caring how unreasonable that sounded. He then finally turned to the guy in the room he was truly there for.

"I must admit, when I saw you last time, I was surprised, but I guess I shouldn't expect anything less of Jacob's dad. What I did not expect was for you to effectively try and start a civil war leading to millions of deaths for no good reason," Jake said, not holding back right from the get-go.

To his credit, Arthur didn't deflect or back down.

"Much has become clearer to me in the last few weeks. Light has been shed on my numerous misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and I now realize my mistakes and can only take full responsibility for my actions. However, I will not apologize for my ultimate reason for doing what I did. What I will apologize for is not realizing that perhaps we want the same thing, making my actions unnecessary and harmful," Arthur answered.

"I am pretty sure you already know that I am quite skeptical of all this. I assume Miranda has filled you in on her plans?" Jake asked.

"She has made me aware, yes. And I also know the decision is ultimately yours to make. What I will make clear is that I also remain skeptical about her proposed arrangement. In all truthfulness, then before I even try to sell myself to this council, I will have to know it will truly be a council and not just a farce to try and sell the mirage of fairness and representation. That it will be a council that can actually lead to positive change and not just work to advance your personal whims or the wishes of the Order of the Malefic Viper," Arthur answered, his gaze firm.

He and Jacob are quite a bit alike, huh, Jake thought. Miranda looked a bit nervous at the standoffish demeanor Arthur had adopted, making it apparent that wasn't how she had expected things to go. Arthur also seemed to misunderstand something.

"It *will* be to further my personal whims," Jake answered truthfully. "Why else would I bother becoming World Leader except for purely selfish reasons?"

Arthur frowned, but he didn't look surprised. "Which begs the question: why even make a council? Why not just have the Order of the Malefic Viper come and take over? With them in charge, it would be-

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Jake interrupted. "I said it was for my personal whims; what does the Order of the Malefic Viper have to do with anything? This entire council idea can be boiled down to a personal whim. Tell me this, why do you think I decided to become World Leader?"

The other man looked at Jake, confused by the question. "To take control and rule the planet?"

"Wrong," Jake shook his head. "I don't give a shit about ruling the planet. What I do give a shit about is to make sure no one else is ruling the planet. I don't want to see the Holy Church or some other bullshit faction take charge and do whatever they want. So, I decided to selfishly just claim the planet and tell everyone else to play nice or fuck off. The system clearly wants someone to take control at some point, and if that is the case, it may as well be me. But that doesn't mean I want to actually rule anything. That is what you are here for."

After talking, Jake threw Miranda a questioning look. He was a bit confused why the hell Arthur was still so ignorant even after all this time. Shouldn't she have explained all this already? However, she just gave him a smile in return.

Arthur looked to be considering Jake's words for a moment before asking: "What is your ultimate goal after gaining control of Earth? What is the goal of the Order of the Malefic Viper, and what, if any, role do they play?"

"I don't have any goal besides keeping things as they are and keep things peaceful. As for the details, that isn't anything I want to deal with. Honestly, I just want a place to return to whenever I want, and for those I care about who remain behind and be safe.

As for the role of the Order? Well, they don't have any, at least not from your point of view. Sure, they will function as a deterrent to other factions, and I probably can't avoid anyone going here in the future. But it will be clear that this is my home turf and for no one to fuck around. There are certain perks to being the Chosen of a Primordial, and with the Viper at my back, no other faction will try to lay claim to Earth either," Jake answered.

The man once more fell silent, his frown making his skepticism obvious.

"And the Order of the Malefic Viper will simply sit back and allow this? What if your Patron asks for you to do something with the planet?" Arthur asked pointedly, still with the same misunderstanding.

"Well, the Order doesn't really have a choice, and if the Viper asks me to do something with Earth I don't like, I will tell him to fuck off," Jake shrugged. "You seem to fundamentally misunderstand the relationship I have with the Order and with the Malefic Viper. I don't serve him for shit, and I am more just a member of the Order by association and shamelessly leeching off them for my own benefit. The Malefic Viper and I are, in the simplest of terms, just good friends. So if he asks me for something, I will listen, but I will listen to him the same as I would listen to Miranda or anyone else here in the room. Well, besides you and the Fallen King."

This time Arthur really didn't know what to say, prompting Miranda to insert herself.

"I have been trying to tell you that you severely misinterpreted who you were dealing with and the current situation. You moved based on biased and false information with little criticism and few attempts to truly verify anything yourself. Was your interpretation one that would be true in ninety-nine percent of cases? Probably, but you still ultimately messed up," Miranda said harshly.

The Sword Saint also decided to talk. "I do not wish to see Earth fall either and would defend it if necessary. My reason for supporting Jake is that I trust him as a person. I learned about him as a hunter before I learned about him as a Chosen. But let me clarify that I will also take a laidback approach to Earth, similar to him... but should the planet be threatened, I will be here. No matter who the threat is, even if it is the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

"Well, there you have it," Jake shrugged. "And, again, If it was up to me, you would not be sitting here. However, I have also become aware that just chopping your head off would lead to even more annoying issues, and while you are wholly ignorant of a lot of things, you seem to at least understand how to manage cities and politics. Your role will be the same as before, just on a council with a few differing opinions."

Arthur seemed to listen and sighed as he looked at the floorboards.

"I do understand that my actions were inexcusable, and I trusted people I never should have. Before I met Ms. Wells, I wasn't even aware of the existence of these Bloodlines, much less that the Chosen of Yip had one. I do realize now it influenced me, but that is no excuse for what I did. Let me also make it clear, Lord Thayne, that I do not fully trust you either, but I also know that trying to oppose you at this point will result in nothing positive," Arthur said before looking up at Jake. "I shall try and do my utmost on this council to try and make up for the mistakes I have made, but I will not compromise who I am or my beliefs. My priority remains the well-being of humanity and preservation of Earth."

"Great," Jake said. "That is exactly what the job description entails. Well, this was easy. Why did we need to meet three days before the World Congress for this again?"

Miranda sighed. "Because there is still a lot of work to prepare and contracts to draw up. Also, Jake, you have some personal matters you should attend to in the meantime."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"I have been informed that the snakes at the Grand Mangrove River require your presence for a teleportation circle that should allow you to travel to the Order of the Malefic Viper again. Also, Arnold would like to see you. Finally, would it be possible for you to ask Carmen to come to Haven? The teleportation network should allow it," Miranda said.

"Oh, no need to worry about Carmen," Jake said with a smile. "She and Sylphie are already well on their way, though they didn't take the teleportation network but chose to take the more cloudy and scenic route. They should be here in a day or two, according to Sylphie." The most update novels are published on [movel♦first♦net](#)

Miranda nodded, surprisingly unsurprised. "Very well. In that case, maybe head over to Arnold or to the Grand Mangrove River. Ah, a teleporter to the Mangrove is already finished, and you can teleport there directly from the Fort. We shall reconvene when Carmen gets here."

"Got it," Jake nodded as he headed out to leave all the political nerds alone.

It was time to see what the resident mad scientist had been up to in recent times.

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Chapter 564: A Visit To the Resident Mad Scientist

Jake really had to restrain himself every time he visited Arnold. Mainly by suppressing his desire to see if he could break through the big dome of metal that guarded his workshop. It looked and felt damn sturdy, but he should have a good shot with enough destructive arcane mana. If not, then surely Touch of the Malefic could do it.

Alas, he was not there to break stuff.

He had already gone to see Arnold before he went on holiday, so he was a bit interested in why Arnold had asked for him to stop by. Interested in what kind of thing the madman had made that he wanted to show Jake and potentially hand him. Or maybe he wanted a favor this time around?

As expected, then he was let straight in, Arnold aware Jake was back. The workshop had expanded once more, this time primarily downwards, it seemed. From Jake's sphere, he also saw some weird robot-looking things digging even further, making it clear the scientist was still expanding.

It didn't take long to locate Arnold, who was working inside a laboratory with a familiar cube. The one Jake had brought from the Void God, Oras.

"Good, you are here," Arnold stated when Jake entered without even turning around.

Jake was a bit surprised, not by what he was doing, but by the response when he used Identify on the man. This content belongs to *novel* ~~**fire**~~ *net*

[Human – lvl 199]

The bastard has surpassed Jake in level. As for if he was working on getting his Perfect Evolution or still had evolution quests to finish, Jake didn't know, but he had still surpassed Jake. Holidays were truly detrimental to growth.

"So, what did you want?" Jake asked bluntly.

"I have been made aware you will soon return to the Order of the Malefic Viper," Arnold stated. "I would ask of you to procure some materials when you are there. Compensation shall naturally follow. Further discussion as to the form of compensation beyond Credits is possible."

"Oh?" Jake asked, a bit surprised, but he quickly got it. Arnold was probably running low on high-level materials. The guy had stockpiled when the system store was around and made ample use of the Holy Church and all other merchant groups... but by now, he had outgrown them. That, or they were gone off the planet.

He maybe even needed them for his evolution quest.

"Sure, we can figure something out," Jake agreed.

Arnold nodded and took out a tablet from his spatial storage, and handed it to Jake. "All details are within. A list has been made and ordered based on priority. Will a deposit of funds for the purchase be necessary?"

"Nah, I should be able to front the cash," Jake shrugged as he took the tablet and opened it to see the... list.

He started scrolling. It kept going.

"Arnold... how many items are there?"

"Eight hundred and seventy-one unique entries, the quantity of each item specified individually," Arnold answered with a deadpan face.

Poor Meira, Jake could only think as he put the tablet in his inventory.

"This is quite a lot," Jake commented. "And even if I don't want a deposit now... maybe we can talk about what you can potentially offer."

Arnold looked at Jake for a moment. "I would advise delaying. Preparations are underway for projects designated for use by C-grades. Based on the assumption that you are close to evolution, I predict any items would be more useful for you then. Moreover, the items requested will, in high likelihood, include the materials required for these projects. Before knowing what is possible to acquire, I cannot give an offer."

"Eh... sound logic," Jake said. He would need a lot of new stuff after his evolution, wouldn't he? "But, give me a sneak peek anyway, okay? Come on, you must have something fun in the works."

The man took a moment before nodding. "Continued research has gone into improving many weapons. Follow me."

Jake gladly did so as they entered another workshop. Walking to a wall, Arnold activated some magic as barriers were rapidly removed. Jake had already seen the hidden room behind the wall and also knew that he had no fucking way to enter it. The way it was hidden was actually damn smart.

The walls that enclosed the room were three or so meters thick and made of metal, very similar to what the dome consisted of. It would take quite a while to get through it, and Jake reckoned only Alchemical Flame could do the job. The opening mechanism to enter was also simple but effective. The door of sorts required one to open it correctly, or a massive wall of steel would fall and block the entrance, and from the looks of it, Arnold had placed bombs on the inside to blow it the hell up if anyone broke in. The dude was very dedicated to protecting his works in progress.

Entering the room, Jake saw a few interesting things.

Firstly was a golem that Jake very much recognized. In a tank filled with murky water, the Census Golem floated, nearly all the destruction on it restored, though by other types of metal. If it was functional, Jake didn't know, but clearly, Arnold was far from done with it.

Next up were a few gun-like things in cases. Or, well, calling them blasters was probably more accurate. Jake had no way to properly evaluate those, but they looked fancy. Besides that, there were many different kinds of drones and spherical robots of sorts that Jake also had no idea about.

Arnold clearly knew this, which is why he led Jake to the one item Jake would likely care about. It was just a thin long piece of metal, but Jake recognized it right away. It was a nanoblade.

"Further improvements of the nanoblade are in progress, the durability, sharpness, and mana conductivity improving continuously. Seeing your recent switch to the use of katars, time will be needed to optimize the internal structure to support thrusting over slashing attacks. Moreover, from your explanations of Fangs of the Malefic Viper, the nanoblade can be further optimized to better facilitate and make use of the skill. I assume you are still interested in the weapon?" Arnold asked.

Jake looked at it for a bit before nodding. While he had two weapons right now, he knew the bone weapon was only temporary. When sim-Jake fully merged with him, it would lose much of its Records and power, making it effectively useless. By then, he would need another katar anyway.

Arnold took out his usual tablet and noted down this answer. "Finally, I recall you are planning on visiting the Grand Mangrove River. If possible, please take this along with you as you are going anyway."

The man summoned a weird-looking cylinder of metal about the size of a person. Jake saw that on the inside, it was filled with mechanisms, and Jake could only throw Arnold a questioning look.

"The spatial mana within the Grand Mangrove River has interesting properties. I would like to analyze it to assist in another project of mine. From my initial tests, while a satellite is easily doable, proper drones for space exploration face challenges in the open cosmos as creatures and energies now lurk there. From my assessment, the Grand Mangrove River's spatial mana has natural properties related to the concept of stealth," Arnold explained.

Jake simply nodded and took the cylinder. "Makes sense."

He had noticed the energy there before, of course. He had not quite identified it as some stealth concept, but then again, maybe it was a mix of space and stealth. Either way, what it truly was and how to make use of it was for Arnold to figure out.

"Anywhere specific you want it placed?" He asked to follow up.

"Somewhere safe, as the measuring device is not made to sustain unnecessary and sudden forces acting upon it during readings," Arnold answered. "Simply place it somewhere and infuse mana into the center circle. That will allow me to know it is in position and remotely activate it."

"Got it," Jake confirmed. As he stood there, he couldn't help but notice the many robots flying everywhere within his sphere within the workshop, especially those that seemed to do some rather complicated work like analyzing what looked like circuit boards. So he couldn't help but ask:

"Say, how do you even manage to control all these drones of yours? Even back in the Treasure Hunt, you had so many flying around. Are they all programmed? Some kind of artificial intelligence?" he asked. It was a bit rude to ask about someone's secrets like that, but considering how much Jake had shared with the man, he thought it okay to ask.

Arnold seemed a bit surprised by the question but was in no way offended. No, it was the exact opposite... he seemed elated that Jake had asked, giving Jake a bad feeling. A feeling that only grew as Arnold lowered his tablet and seemed to dedicate his whole attention to Jake as he explained.

"A number of methods have been applied. Most mundane models still run on simple programming, while more advanced models make use of artificial soul constructs. The Altmar Census Golem was my basis for these constructs, and I can only admire their ingenuity and prowess. However, the methodology and magiscripts used by the Altmar Empire do not suit my own, requiring me to adapt it, which made me switch to a more unorthodox approach by applying scripts and runes of the eldritch variety. The skill I received from Oras allows me to more easily split my attention between different tasks, and by augmenting the concepts within, I managed to implement soul constructs faintly mimicking my own, which then also allows me to temporarily fully immerse a part of my conscious within a given model. Do note that I do not need to use this functionality as the artificial soul construct will already act based on pre-programmed instructions and can be updated remotely through the eldritch scripts. Finally, all information from every drone is fed to me continuously, which required me to develop skills and methods to filter, archive, and in other ways, sort through all data gathered. Models of machine learning are being applied here, which do require further development and improvement of skills, but the prospects are promising. If you are interested in delving into some examples of this theory, I could show you-"

"No, I'm good," Jake cut him off. Okay, he had gotten way more than he had bitten off, and it did sound interesting, but more the kind of interesting that Casper would be excited about. Sure, Jake understood what Arnold meant, but he also understood that what Arnold was doing some something others simply couldn't. From how he understood it, Arnold effectively split his mind into segments and had each handle

different things. At least partly. Of course, this wasn't really anything special, and, in fact, it was considered kind of normal to do this. Jake could, as an example, focus on different things at once while doing alchemy or using magic, but Arnold had taken it to a whole new level for a D-grade. One could only imagine how much more extreme it would become when he reached C-grade.

"Have you faced any issues with different personas emerging or conflicting thoughts?" Jake did have to ask as he knew that was a risk. Especially as he was dealing with someone using the Legacy of a Void God. Eldritch things and human brains didn't mesh well based on all the books Jake had read pre-system.

"No," Arnold simply answered.

"Well, geez," Jake joked, having expected him to at least admit he had some problems. "Did you make a legendary skill or something to not mess with your head?"

"The initial skill received by Oras was at legendary rarity," Arnold confirmed, making Jake feel a bit better... at least until the next sentence.

"However, I only became able to properly create my artificial soul constructs who were able to act autonomously after the upgrade to mythical rarity."

Jake was taken aback. "You created a mythical skill?"

Arnold, even more surprisingly, shook his head. "No, not truly. Due to its nature as a Legacy skill, I did not upgrade my title from the achievement due to the offered Records and assistance from Oras."

That at least made Jake feel a bit better, and he even felt some relief from within his Soulspace as sim-Jake was also looking on.

"Well, either way, damn if it isn't impressive. Say, you pretty much put a part of your soul into each of these machines, right?" Jake asked.

"No, that assessment is incorrect. My soul remains intact and singular. However, partitions are linked through void scripts to each model," Arnold clarified.

Jake nodded. "I see. Well, this has been very enlightening, but if there isn't more, I should be on my way."

"Very well," Arnold answered, looking a bit disappointed, before leading Jake out of the hidden room with all his interesting works in progress. Jake said his goodbyes and quickly headed out toward the teleporter. On his way, he had to admit... he felt a bit relieved.

The reason for that last question was actually pretty simple. He wanted to probe if Arnold had delved into soul magic or what people often called soul ritualism. Jake already did some soul magic himself, but he wanted to see if Arnold had begun to delve into actually altering his own soul. Mixing eldritch magic and soul magic couldn't be good in Jake's eyes, and also, there was one final reason.

He wanted to know if Arnold planned on staying human. From how Jake saw it, Arnold was a prime candidate for someone to evolve out of their usual human form, maybe even turning himself into a robot or sentient computer or some shit.

However, this was not necessarily a smart thing to do. Arnold was still human, no matter how weird he was, and still had many of the more positive traits of humanity, such as emotions. Arnold becoming a robot was a prime path to turning evil, especially with his Patron.

Jake could only imagine the horrors of a sentient eldritch supercomputer without any empathy or emotions. While it was entirely possible for Arnold to not go down this path even if he changed his form, it was a potential threat. At least it looked like Arnold was not planning anything like this but would remain a living human supercomputer instead.

Shaking his head, Jake moved on to the next task at hand: visiting the Grand Mangrove River. He hadn't been there since he traveled through with Carmen and Sylphie but had wanted to visit for a while, primarily to thank them for helping him out by protecting Miranda and the others when he couldn't. Miranda had praised them a lot, especially the Crimsoneye Alabaster Snake, who led the group. It was only right that Jake would go in person to show his gratitude and chat with them.

As he got close to the teleporter, he suddenly remembered something. Jake had a tendency to zone out during long boring talks, but he did remember Miranda mentioning the name of the Crimsoneye Snake at some point.... he just couldn't quite recall what she was called.

Oh well, I can just ask her.

Jake also remembered Miranda mentioning that the snake had learned to take human form, so that was also interesting and definitely something he wanted to check out and talk to her about.

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Chapter 565: Snake Friends Visit!

To call the settlement in the Grand Mangrove River a city wasn't quite right. It was more of a small village, though it had been expanding in recent times, especially after the teleporter was installed. The reason for this was also quite obvious.

It was a prime hunting ground.

A settlement like this was rare as one could teleport directly into a place with D-grades all around you while still being safe. One had to remember that only a handful of people on Earth could fight C-grades, and the vast majority thus still needed to hunt D-grades to progress. Even the people considered elite struggled with stronger D-grades.

Additionally, it was a great place for those with the wood of water affinity to fight. Finally, it had one other advantage that Jake hadn't really considered: it was a place where C-grades could go if Jake wanted to meet with them there. Thinking about it deeper, it was probably the place Jake would meet with whatever final council member the King found.

All of this being possible was naturally due to a certain snake. A snake Jake was now on his way to meet once he felt done scouting out the village. It did have an interesting setup due to the environment, and there were quite a lot of people around, all of them pretty high-level D-grades. However, what he cared most about were two buildings.

The first of which was the largest building and a main office of sorts. The second one was a small but well-guarded building that Jake saw led into a pit of sorts going deep inside the Grand Mangrove River water. Not sure which one to check out first; Jake went for the pit after sensing the aura from it.

By the way, when Jake said well-guarded, then it wasn't by any of the C-grades but just two humans. There were also barriers that would no doubt make everyone aware if someone tried to break in, but none of that was an issue for Jake as the guard recognized him and opened the entrance to the pit without a word.

As for why Jake wanted to explore the pit so badly? Because he felt a familiar aura from beneath. One that reminded him a lot of the monument that Chris had built that allowed him to teleport to the Order of the Malefic Viper...

Jake felt a flare-up of anger, but he quickly suppressed it before the guards even noticed and entered the pit.

I swear, that orange fuck is gonna get what he deserves, Jake said to himself as he began going down the pit. It looked more like a deep well than anything else, and Jake didn't hesitate to jump down and allowed himself to freefall.

He fell for a bit over twenty seconds, putting the depth of the hole at around a kilometer. Upon landing, Jake found himself in a dug-out cavern with several tunnels leading away from it. He noticed that all of these tunnels had engravings on the walls and hummed with magic. Feeling curious, Jake began making his way through a tunnel and saw it

lead into another similar chamber, though without the entrance. Closing his eyes, Jake used his senses to get a feeling for the space.

It's a magic circle, he swiftly concluded.

The pattern was far too purposeful and distinct for it to be anything else. Jake wondered if the creator was anywhere nearby but soon got his answer. A presence made its way through one of the tunnels, and Jake turned to face it. A long brownish snake slithered in his direction, its size filling out nearly half of the tunnel, putting its diameter at nearly four meters. Jake guessed the beast had to be several hundred meters long, and its head was large enough to eat a human whole. Not that Jake felt any threat as he recognized the snake as one of those who followed the Crimsoneye one.

"Hey there," Jake greeted the snake as it got close. It then did something utterly terrifying.

The face of the snake began warping. Bone cracked, flesh twisted, and a vaguely humanoid face straight out of a nightmare emerged, still on the body of the massive snake.

"Grrrreetingsss Maeeeelefic'ssssss Chooossssennnn," the snake spoke, showing off the prowess of Jake's translation skill by even allowing him to comprehend what the snake had said through the hissing.

"Good practice with the transformation, but how about we keep this conversation telepathic?" Jake offered. He really didn't want to insult a snake that was clearly trying so hard.

Nearly instantly, the face warped back to the old snake visage as a voice echoed in Jake's mind. *"Thank you for your permission to speak in this fashion; I am not as adept as the others in the art of human speech and have neglected practice with the Polymorph skill."*

"All good," Jake answered, happy to not look at the nightmare creature the snake had transformed into. He was also surprised at the telepathic voice of the snake. It sounded... old? Most beasts Jake spoke to telepathically sounded very young, but this snake sounded on the more mature side.

"Have you come looking for the mistress?" the snake asked.

"Partly. I also came to check out the work down here. Well, not specifically the work down here, as I didn't know what it would look like, but it is quite impressive. Are you involved in making the magic circle?" Jake asked the large snake.

He had a feeling the snake was for a few reasons. First of all, he faintly felt the space affinity from the snake. Secondly, it was down in the tunnel where the formation was being made, and lastly, it had a Blessing of the Malefic Viper.

“Yes, this one has been given the honor of creating this grand work of art. I thank the Chosen for this opportunity. I hope to do the task to the utmost of my abilities,” the large brown snake said in an overly polite and submissive tone. He could try to convince the snake to treat him more normally, but it wasn't worth it.

“From the looks of it, you are doing a splendid job,” Jake praised the snake. “But I heard a part of the process requires my assistance; am I correct?”

“Such is the will of the Malefic One. The circle will need to be attuned and rely on the True Blessing of his Chosen so only he can teleport and decide who goes or not,” the snake explained.

“Great, what do you need of me and where? Please lead the way, and let's get it solved right away.”

“Please follow me, my Lord,” the snake said and did something Jake had not seen coming. It managed to turn around in a narrow tunnel as space around it seemed to warp and twist. A second later, the snake had done a one-eighty and began moving, Jake following the old snake through the winding tunnel system of runes and magic. As he moved through, he did notice spots where his ritualism skill made him aware things were missing or unfinished, making it clear it was still a work in progress. Yet it also gave him the sense it was “done.”

“Say, is the formation functional after this infusion part?” Jake asked.

“Yes,” the snake confirmed. *“However, as the Chosen has no doubt noticed, the work is far from done. The Malefic One has plans beyond a simple teleporter requiring your presence but wishes to allow it to hold more functions that will be helpful to the Chosen later on.”*

Jake nodded, not asking any further. One thing was clear, the current formation was already far more potent than what Chris had managed to make. Then again, this was created by a C-grade with innate talent, while the other one had been made by a low-level D-grade. Thinking about it further, the fact that Chris could even make the monument, to begin with, was impressive. Now, as much as it sucked, the monument site had been turned into a graveyard. A memorial and reminder.

They did not exchange any more words before they reached what Jake assumed to be the center of the formation. At that center was an intricate circle with vein-like green pulsing fissures leading away from it and into the tunnels. The very epicenter held a pillar of metal Jake did not recognize with even more advanced scripts on it. Jake could feel it was a natural treasure of some kind but had no clue as to its properties.

“My lord, if you would do me the honors of stepping into the center circle and blessing the pillar with the Touch of the Malefic Viper,” the snake asked Jake.

Jake did as asked and used One Step to enter the center circle and activated Touch of the Malefic Viper as he touched the pillar. The moment he did so, he felt a response from the pillar, and the energy Jake injected was guided through magical channels in the metal. Jake gladly complied and infused his energy into these channels as the metal began to glow dark green.

The fissures of green energy began to shine brighter all throughout the spacious cavern, and Jake felt part of his own presence be mimicked by the pillar. He felt a pull on the part of himself that made him a Chosen, the natural treasure taking everything in. A few minutes passed as Jake simply infused his energy as the treasure naturally guided him to do until it stopped wanting anything.

At that moment, Jake felt an odd connection form, and the pillar cracked as parts of it fell off. The shards that fell floated in mid-air as they reassembled into an about ten-centimeter-long shard of metal filled with runic lines and humming with energy.

Jake reached out and grabbed it, making him instantly know what it was. It was there to control this entire magic circle.

“It is done!” the snake said with much happiness. *“Truly marvelous! I thank the Chosen for blessing us with his presence and displaying his prowess. From my understanding, the shard you just received shall function as the control catalyst for the formation and shall allow you to teleport to a corresponding circle outside of this universe.”*

“I see. Excellent work,” Jake simply answered, already feeling it himself. As he stood there in the center circle, he knew he could activate and be teleported to the first universe if he so wished. He even felt like he didn’t necessarily need to be in the center circle but that he could quite easily draw up a smaller circle that allowed him to tap into the concepts of this main formation to teleport from elsewhere.

Jake marveled at the shard a bit longer and analyzed the formation as best he could, but he did not have long before something else caught his attention. An aura approached through the tunnel, one far faster than the old brown snake had been. Far stronger too. He smiled as the presence was a very familiar one, and soon enough, an albino figure appeared before him... though she did look quite a bit different.

He failed to hold back as he lightly smiled and bowed his head briefly in gratitude. “It’s been a while. I am sorry for not stopping by earlier and thanking you for keeping Miranda and the others safe.”

Miranda’s description of the human form truly didn’t do it justice. She looked human, yes, but also clearly not. The scales were strategically placed throughout her body, not a single one of them of a cosmetic nature. Her reptilian pupils honed and improved

compared to even her snake form, and the skin-like dress she wore was far from just a useless garment, but no doubt had quite the defensive properties. Was the form made to be aesthetically pleasing to humans? Yes, but it was also made with function in mind. Some sacrifices had been made to make her look more human, but overall it was incredibly well done for her to refine her humanoid form that much. However, her human form did have one major drawback compared to her snake form.

Her demeanor as a shy teenage girl was even more obvious.

The Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake, the mid-tier C-grade, stood nervously as she twisted some of her hair around a finger, looking like she didn't quite know what to say.

"I... eh, I just did as the Chosen would expect of me, you know..." she mumbled.

"You did me a favor, whether you thought it was expected of you or not. For that, I am naturally grateful and owe you one. I heard you even spent quite some time with Miranda and the others. I hope they were pleasant guests?" Jake asked, still smiling in what he hoped was a welcoming and comforting way.

"Yes, of course!" the snake girl insisted. "Ms. Wells was very nice and taught me a lot. She even helped me with making this settlement and stuff, and I wanted to go visit Haven, but I can't teleport due to the stupid system," she grumbled, at least looking a bit more comfortable now.

"It is what it is," Jake shrugged. "How about we get out of here and get up to the main office? I think we are done here, right?"

The last part was addressed to the large brown snake that nodded. *"Yes, my lord, you have more than done your part. I shall no longer delay you from attending to your matters."*

"How come old grumpy isn't using his human form? He has been working on it so hard," the snake girl asked with a questioning look.

Jake scratched his chin. "We decided telepathy was more efficient."

A bald-faced lie that the albino snake nodded to instantly... before suddenly looking faintly horrified. "Would... would the Chosen prefer for me to use telepathy too?"

"Hm?" Jake said, a bit surprised. "No, I prefer your human form and talking like this."

Again, a bit of a lie. Jake didn't really care much either way if the snake was in human or beast form or used telepathy or not when they spoke. But he had enough awareness to know that the snake girl had only become a snake girl to try and better cater to what Jake wanted, and he saw no reason not to make her happy by saying he preferred her human form. When being kind was free and not a hassle, why not?

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, my lord! Shall we head upwards then?"

"Let us," Jake said as he began walking through the tunnel, followed by the snake girl. That is when he remembered one of the most important things he had to ask: "By the way, did you ever settle on a name you wanted?" Fresh chapters posted on [novel](#) [fire](#) [met](#)

She stopped for a millisecond when he asked, getting all shy again. "I... I had a really hard time deciding. Ah! Not because the suggestions of the Chosen were bad, but solely due to my own lack of naming sense! I loved both Scarlett and Allie, and I even suggested combining them as Scallie-"

That would have been a perfectly fine name, Jake approved internally.

"-but Ms. Wells shot that down. But... I still loved both, so I thought of maybe still combining them somehow? That is when Ms. Wells said that humans can actually have more than one name or even have a first and a last name. So... I thought maybe go with Scarlett Allie? Or Allie Scarlett? Or make it the last name, so maybe Scarlett Allieson?"

Jake considered it and nodded. "I think all of those are fine, but does Allieson fit? Normally the "son" part comes from a parent or ancestor or some other family member called that."

"... my mom or dad could have been called Allie?" the snake girl asked without a hint of joking in her voice.

"You know what? Who is to say," Jake smiled and shook his head. *Should I begin to call Sylphie, Sylphie Hawkson now? Wait, how does it even work when she is a daughter... who the hell even made up this entire stupid naming convention? And people call my naming sense bad; that is no more original than adding "ie" at the end of someone's race name.*

"Then... then can I be Scarlett Allieson from now on?" she asked in a shy tone.

"Sure, if that is what you want," Jake nodded.

"Then I want that name," she said with affirmation.

Jake stopped and turned around as he extended a hand. "Well then, nice to meet you, Scarlett Allieson. You can just call me Jake Thayne."

Scarlett looked even shyer as she extended her small hand and took his. "Ah... the pleasure is mine?"

Miranda has done some socialization work on this one, Jake joked internally as he turned around and continued walking towards the main building above.

The two of them only exchanged some casual chatter as they made their way toward the surface for a proper meeting... though he did fail in getting her to call him Jake or even Mr. Thayne or something just a little less formal than “Chosen.”

But hey, baby steps. One had to be patient with teenagers, after all.

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Chapter 566: C-grade Checklist

Scarlett had a hard time imagining it. The first time she met the Chosen had been so brief, and she had barely had any time to talk to him as he was busy just making his way through the Mangrove. She also didn't fully realize who he was back then. With time she did come to understand and began to think about how she could make herself useful to the Forefather and his Chosen.

She was naturally elated when the Chosen trusted her enough to defend his comrades from danger and even more happy when those comrades chose to stay. Ms. Wells even taught Scarlett so many things. The more senior servant of the Forefather's Chosen told her about how some enemy Chosen of an extremely powerful god had backstabbed the Forefather's Chosen and tried to kill him. Or, well, maybe the goal was not to kill him? Scarlett wasn't sure. All she knew was that several comrades of the bad Chosen were killed, and the coward fled, resulting in the Malefic's Chosen taking over the world just as one would expect. As things should be.

Now, after his victory, he had finally returned to the Mangrove, where they were doing everything to help him, Old Grumpy snake even making a formation for the Chosen to teleport to the Order as he pleased.

But what she had truly had a hard time imagining was not any of his feats but his demeanor and sheer presence. Scarlett had met many humans and beasts, but one thing was for sure:

The Chosen was the coolest of them all.

Like, he was so cool in everything. He was only D-grade, sure, but Scarlett felt like she walked beside a far more powerful beast than herself. Logically she knew she didn't, but his presence was still awe-inspiring. To add on, he had not a shred of fear. Scarlett had

honed her skills in evaluating humans. She could quite literally smell fear and weakness, and any kind of nervousness would be clear before her eyes. Yet she felt none of those things from the Chosen. In fact, she was the one who felt scared and nervous when she walked with him... how couldn't she? He was the Chosen of the Forefather.

"Scarlett," the Chosen asked, making her feel all bubbly inside from him using her name. "Have you considered what your future plans are?"

Scarlett was perplexed for a moment about what he meant. Thinking a bit about it, she didn't really have any plans besides helping the Chosen. The formation was not anything she could help with, and the Mangrove was firmly under their control. Even if she was not there alone, the other C-grades could easily handle anything that cropped up. Besides that, her only plan had been to maybe explore the ocean and hunt there – something she had already been doing for a while. It wasn't the best hunting ground, and it often took a long time to find worthy prey, but she had to take what she could get. Worst of all, she had to do the hunting in her true form.

Not that anything she currently did mattered if the Chosen had other thoughts in mind.

"Does the Chosen have anything he wants me to do?" she asked, feeling a bit of hope. Maybe he had more he wanted her to help with?

"No, not anything like that," he answered, making Scarlett a bit disappointed.

"I was just considering if you have considered going to the Order of the Malefic Viper? I have explored a bit of Earth, and while it is possible, I doubt the planet is that good of a place for someone like you to grow. I am positive there are no B-grades, and even peak C-grades would be astronomically rare, assuming they even exist. Meanwhile, going to the Order would open up a multiverse of possibilities," the Chosen said, Scarlett, listening intensely while barely holding herself back from screaming "YES!" after the very first sentence as she tried to remain respectful.

"Going to the Order of the Forefather would be both an honor and a privilege," Scarlett answered with a big smile on her face as courteously as she could, even bowing a bit, the same way she had seen some young human women do it.

"Great," the Chosen said with a smile. "Now, if possible, can you show me a safe place for a measuring device within the settlement?"

"Naturally," Scarlett complied without asking further questions.

"And can you then do me one other small favor after?" the Chosen asked as he turned and looked at her.

"The Chosen does not even need to ask," Scarlett answered with conviction.

“Nice, I just wanted you to bite me a few times.”

Scarlett froze and took a moment to process what he had asked before her face turned red, and she completely zoned out... only to still hear the very next sentence.

“Eh, to make it fair, I could bite you too?”

In retrospect, maybe Jake’s words could be misinterpreted, but he really couldn’t hold himself back forever when standing next to a snake girl like her. It was irresistible and impossible not to ask for at least a little bite to get some of that sweet snake venom.

From a distance, her venom was not detectable, but when walking right next to her, his Sense of the Malefic Viper kept making him aware that the small snake girl harbored venom capable of killing hundreds of D-grades with a single drop. It was so strong that not even Jake was sure how he could handle it with Palate at legendary rarity, but he just had to give it a go.

It took him a minute to calm the poor snake girl down after she looked to have short-circuited. Once he got her to relax and listen to his explanation, it suddenly made a lot more sense to the girl, though that still added the complexity of her now being super embarrassed she had misunderstood.

“Are you certain, Chosen? My venom is quite potent, and I have only honed it further since I received the Blessing from the Malefic One, my Toxicity stat growing significantly,” she asked. Jake biting into the last part.

“You have a dedicated Toxicity stat?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes?” Scarlett answered. “Oh! Yeah, humans have different stats. I got a stat called Toxicity that is related to how toxic anything I do is, making it stronger.”

“Did it replace any of the nine we humans have?” Jake continued asking curiously.

“I do not have the Intelligence stat. This one allows my toxins to be far stronger, but it does limit my magical capabilities in many other areas,” she explained openly.

“Makes sense,” Jake nodded. “But I still want some venom for my own Palate skill. It has been a while since I encountered a toxin it proved ineffective against. Don’t worry; if it goes wrong, I have plenty of anti-toxins.”

Not that he was sure those would work, but why worry her? Jake was confident in his survival.

“Okay... but...” Scarlett kind of agreed, clearly unsure.

“Aight, you win. No rush, we can always do it after going to the Order if you want where we got assistance nearby if we do mess it up,” Jake smiled to comfort her. It maybe was also smart to have Meira nearby as she was a healer. Oh, and Duskleaf.

“Let us wait...” Scarlett said with relief.

“Got it. Now let’s go get this weird machine placed for Arnold.”

It only took him a bit before Scarlett showed him a place where he could deposit it safely, and Scarlett even told a C-grade snake to keep an eye on it. Jake activated it right away and saw it spin to life as what looked like a satellite dish emerged from its top, and he faintly detected the device sucking in mana.

With that done, Jake didn’t really have any more plans before it was time to go to the World Congress. A Congress that should, for all intents and purposes, be nothing more than a formality.

Scarlett was clearly intent on shadowing him, and he saw no reason not to allow it. It was a bit awkward, though, like going to a birthday party as the oldest cousin and having teenagers ten years younger than yourself follow you around.

Luckily, what he planned next did not include a lot of moving around. With some time to spare, Jake found a nice place to relax and noted down his aptly-named pre-C-grade checklist:

1. Become World Leader at the World Congress.
2. Upgrade Sense of the Malefic Viper.
3. Upgrade Sagacity of the Malefic Viper.
4. Go to Order and defeat baby Snappy
5. Mythical skill creation with the help of sim-Jake
6. Actually evolve.

Jake nodded at the mental checklist and didn’t immediately notice anything missing. The first item was easy and would come in a couple of days if all went to plan. As for two and three, then upgrading the two skills was something Jake had subtly been working on for a while and had thought a lot about, even during his holiday, and it honestly should not be too hard. Plus, he would use Path of the Heretic-Chosen for both as he had two uses left.

Four and five Jake would combine, though it is more accurate to say that Jake wanted to do four during five. Jake knew that he needed a good battle for an upgrade, and he

had discussed the skill sim-Jake wanted a lot with his other self. He also knew that it was not as easy as both of them had hoped and that they would likely need more preparation than first expected. However, in any case, then they both knew that live battle was the best time to consolidate everything and make the skill. It was only when in a life-and-death situation that Jake's instincts were at their sharpest, and the best results could be reached.

Number six should also be kind of easy. As for the evolution quests, Jake wasn't worried. In fact, he had a strong feeling as to what they would be. Especially the one for his profession. But, rather than theorize, it was better to just see the quest, and the easiest way to do that was to get one more level in his profession.

So why not kill two birds with one stone and also get in a skill upgrade? As for the skill he would upgrade first, it really was a no-brainer. It was the skill Jake should have arguably upgraded as one of the first but had somehow ended up never really focusing on. It was naturally Sense of the Malefic Viper.

Checking the description, Jake focused on the part that mattered:

...Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities...

Rather than focusing on what the skill currently did, he focused on what it didn't do. The usual goal when upgrading was to find aspects the Viper's version had and add those or improve current functions. Feeling herbs and poisons, the skill already did damn well, and the ability to detect affinities was also something Jake found hard to improve upon. Same for detecting poison he had inflicted. Which made him fast conclude he had to focus on adding additional functionality.

An obvious one was the ability to also sense natural treasures, but Jake kind of already could. Most natural treasures gave off intense affinities, so he could find them when close, and if they were of herbal or toxic nature, the skill still worked on them. So, while that would likely be an easy addition, Jake wasn't sure if that alone would be enough to qualify for an upgrade or even be useful to him. No, he needed something else.

Jake considered what would be useful to him. What he could really need. He had thought about this a lot and even looked at some of the other Malefic Viper skills for inspiration. That did give him some ideas, but ultimately, the direction Jake went in fit him far more. He went as simple as he could. UPDATE FROM **novel•fire•met**

Perception was by far Jake's highest stat, and he made use of it in everything he did.

When forming magic, Jake felt the flow of mana; he felt how it formed and assembled itself, including noticing any mistakes. Jake did many micro-corrections all the time when doing magic or really anything requiring control.

He also used Perception in combat, even in ways Jake did not quite understand but that sim-Jake had helped him at least be aware of. He sensed the flow of battle, the concepts of momentum, and many other things that fed his instincts during battle.

Even when using stamina, Jake used it. He felt it flow through his body, and he directed it. Because it all came down to one basic concept.

Seeing is understanding, and before something can be controlled, you need to understand or at least be aware of it first. Perception was the first step of everything and, needless to say, had also become a massive aspect of Jake's methodology in alchemy.

Jake could notice far more than other alchemists when crafting due to his insane Bloodline-boosted Perception. He could learn and understand more simply based on what he could perceive. His collected data from any experiment was immense compared to the average alchemist, something his trip to Skyggen and teaching their alchemists made extremely clear. But they could still detect a lot during crafting, not due to a Sphere of Perception and an insanely high stat, but due to their skills. Which is when Jake asked a very fundamental question.

Why did Sense of the Malefic Viper not help with *anything* during crafting? When he first got the skill, Jake had thought maybe that was just not what Sense of the Malefic Viper was about, but that the skill only revolved around one thing: finding materials. However, it now also helped him locate places good at growing materials and detect affinities in general. It even had the function of sensing the poison he had inflicted. So why not allow him to better sense what he was crafting?

The problem was just how to upgrade that. How to try to feel more when crafting using Sense? It didn't make much sense – pun intended – to Jake to try and do that. He already was trying to feel as much as he could during crafting, and Sense of the Malefic Viper naturally already helped during that, though indirectly.

No, what Jake wanted was not just to feel *more* but to feel different. Pick up things he didn't before, either because he wasn't aware of them existing or his Perception somehow not being high enough.

If Jake was being honest, he would be fine if all the upgrade did was just add a line about increasing the effectiveness of Perception during crafting, as that would be a huge boon in itself, but he knew he needed more.

As he was sitting in meditation with a snake girl who also chose to "meditate" nearby while throwing looks his way every five seconds, Jake kept tossing around ideas in his

mind. While considering all the different options he could possibly see work, he tried to check the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill, and wouldn't you know it? He had passed the invisible threshold.

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

Well, don't mind if I do, Jake promptly agreed as his vision turned black.

If he couldn't figure it out himself, why not see what the Viper had come up with?

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Chapter 567: Sensing the Missing Link In Monster Alchemy

The vision quickly materialized as Jake found himself in a large cave. Extremely dense mana dominated the area, with the source being a humanoid figure sitting in the center. It was naturally the Malefic Viper as he looked to be doing alchemy. The black cauldron in front of him was giving off a faint mist, and the would-be Primordial looked to be focusing deeply.

Yet after a dozen seconds, Jake noticed the mist change color, and he instantly knew: the creation was ruined.

"Pathetic!" the Viper cursed as he slapped the cauldron away, making the rancid failed brew spill all over the cavern. "Absolutely pathetic."

His anger was palpable, though the only one he was angry at was himself. Thinking back, Jake had never seen the Viper actually do alchemy normally, making him more than interested in seeing his methodology. With it being part of a vision, the insight Jake got would also be far more substantial.

After a few moments, the Viper sighed and, with a wave of his hand, had the cauldron float over again. A bit of cleaning later, he tried once more, Jake feeling the entire process from the beginning this time around. As he did this, Jake also got a far better feel for the Viper's level.

Barely C-grade.

Jake did not know if it was a pattern, but he felt like the visions got closer and closer to Jake's own level with every passing one. While it could be argued that seeing a vision

from Villy's later years would be more beneficial as he would experience higher-level concepts and more advanced skills, the opposite was also true. Seeing lower-leveled skills made it easier for Jake to pick up insights and comprehend what the Viper did.

In this case, Jake could actually understand what the Viper did quite easily. Primarily because of how pathetically simple his work was... because what the Viper was trying to make wasn't anything complicated but just a normal health potion. So, yeah, Villy talking about how his failure was pathetic was kind of on-point.

He also noticed how the cauldron wasn't anything special. Jake could not identify it but guessed that it was common or uncommon rarity at most. Seeing these things, Jake became more and more sure exactly when in the timeline this was. Content originally comes from [novel▀fire▀net](#)

This was just after the Viper learned to take human form and wanted to learn more regular alchemy. As a snake or even winged snake, the Viper did not do alchemy the conventional way as far as Jake had gathered. Rather than crafting using mana, it was more like using internal energy to hone and store toxins. In humanoid form, the Viper had to switch it up and learn to do alchemy the same way humans did, which was an entirely different approach. An approach he clearly struggled with.

The Viper kept cursing as he failed another crafting attempt, time now being sped up in Jake's vision. Having experienced these visions so many times before, Jake knew what he was waiting for: the moment of the Viper's epiphany. Jake didn't believe the skill would show him the Viper just failing over and over again... though that would be quite funny.

A few more failures happened, all with sped-up time. The level of frustration of the Viper grew with every second, and he even began to take out different booklets to skim through. Basic crafting books about potions.

Jake's sense of schadenfreude from the Viper sucking so much at potions eventually turned to confusion. Even if the Viper failed a few times, it didn't make sense he kept failing. He was C-grade, and Jake could see Villy's level of mana control was far beyond the required level to craft a simple healing potion.

Clearly, Villy also realized this problem as he scanned the books one by one. Sometimes he took out the cauldron and tried again, but the process just kept failing. Jake watched on as his frown deepened and noticed something. There were small flaws... small oversights in the Viper's base brew that Jake had never encountered before when he made potions. As time passed, the Viper also noticed this issue and was as stumped as Jake was.

However, another disparity became clear between Jake and the Viper... a disparity Jake had never imagined. He failed to hold back a smile at the realization.

He had more Perception than the Malefic Viper.

Not the real one, obviously, but he had more than this newly evolved C-grade version of Villy. Villy also didn't have Jake's Bloodline or his basic crafting skills, much less a proper cauldron, making it even harder for him to discover whatever stumped him. He truly was like those alchemists at the Court.

As for what Villy lacked, Jake also discovered it quite easily.

All alchemists – those with the profession, that is – possessed crafting skills. Brew Potion was the applicable skill in this instance. However, as a beast, Villy did not have such a crafting skill and was trying to one-hundred percent freeform magic the alchemy.

The reason why the method failed was that the books expected the Viper to have the required skills. Those skills helped one with so many different things, including automation of certain minor aspects that the Viper was now missing.

With the lacking Perception, it also looked like Villy wouldn't be able to figure it out. The fast-forwarding of the vision soon stopped having as many pauses as Jake felt time pass. Days turned to weeks as weeks turned to months. The Viper kept trying to craft basic potions, sometimes getting closer but always failing.

Occasionally he would make a poison, almost as if he was testing if he still had his touch. Whenever he made poison, he added a bit of his own blood or venom, and he even tried this with potions, naturally failing. Jake had tried that one, and it wasn't that easy.

After the eighth month of fast-forwarding, the Viper stopped. Villy simply sat there and stared at the cauldron for the longest time, sometimes glancing at the massive pit he had made of failed potions. He looked lost, but not like he had given up.

"What is wrong?" Villy asked himself. "It should work, but it doesn't. Are monsters just not meant to do alchemy? No... I can do it; I am just missing something."

The Viper stood up and went over to the pit of health potions he had failed to make. He knelt down and scooped up some of it to drink, sneering at the horrible taste. Jake himself also faintly tasted it in his mouth, though he wasn't sure if it was due to shared senses or if he just remembered the time he tried to taste that rancid crap himself.

"Nothing," the Viper mulled to himself after a few moments, Jake knowing he had used Palate.

Falling onto his back, the Viper stared at the cave's ceiling. After a few moments, he sat up and, to Jake's surprise, spat some liquid into the palm of his hand. Jake saw the liquid and felt its toxic properties. Yet he also felt the vitality-based properties and the

similarity to the failed health potions. The Viper had consumed some of it and refined it into a potent toxin using his own body.

The Viper shook his head again as he tossed the liquid away. A few more moments passed as slowly a frown formed on his brows. The frown soon changed into a look of realization as his eyes shot open.

"Maybe..." the Viper muttered as he quickly ran over to the cauldron.

Jake was unsure what Villy had realized and observed intently. His intuition told him what he had been waiting for was about to happen.

Villy picked up the cauldron and sat with both of his hands on it as he usually did, but then did something unexpected. His hands began to faintly glow with energy as mana was infused into the cauldron, far more than usual. Sharp fingernails dug into the metal as Jake felt it slowly change - Touch of the Malefic Viper active. Yet he was not transmuting it or even corrupting it, simply... attuning it?

That is when Jake's point of view changed, and the best part of the vision began. He merged with Villy as the senses of the Viper fully became his own. On top of his usual ones, of course. The moment the merge happened, Jake felt a connection with the cauldron in front of him, and Jake soon realized what the Viper was doing.

He was forcefully soul-binding the cauldron.

It was something that was honestly a bad idea in nearly all cases, but Jake soon came to understand. Because as he Soulbound it, he also slowly emerged a small part of his soul into the cauldron, something he could only do if a proper connection was formed with his soul first.

With both hands still on the cauldron, he summoned the ingredients. Water, flowers, grass, it was all slowly deposited into the cauldron, and it did not take long for Jake to feel a difference. He could detect what was going on inside the cauldron so intimately that it just felt... odd. It was as if the cauldron was actually part of his body, like a second stomach.

A metaphor Jake came to learn in the very next moment was very apt.

Because another skill also responded at that moment. During all crafts, some vapor would be released while the desired energies got extracted, and some minor parts would always go to waste. This just always happened, and there was no way around it. The loss was often negligible, and the lost parts were undesirable, but it was there. There to be consumed.

Palate of the Malefic Viper thrummed to life as the Viper absorbed these unwanted parts of the brew while it was still ongoing. He then did something else unexpected – he

directly absorbed parts of the brew through the cauldron walls like it was the walls of his stomach.

Jake felt his own Soulshape – one that was now merged fully with the Viper – and saw that it looked different. The cauldron had become a part of his Soulspace in a similar fashion to a phantasmal limb, and Jake also knew that this technique was insanely risky. Risky... but effective.

For the Viper, it had one especially effective feature. Because Jake, sharing senses with the Viper, instantly felt an aspect of Sense of the Malefic Viper he did not possess. Not because it was a potent application, but because it simply wasn't one Jake needed: it allowed the Viper to far better sense anything alchemical inside of his body.

In fact, it was probably a pretty normal skill for most beasts to have. Sandy clearly had a skill similar to it so they could absorb natural treasures eaten, and Jake guessed many other monsters did too. How else would they analyze and break down natural treasures they ate if they could not properly sense them?

With the Viper, there was also the aspect of him honing his poison. Scarlett already mentioned how she effectively cultivated to improve her own venom internally, and Jake also knew the Viper could do something similar. In other words, the best kind of alchemy the Viper was capable of in this vision was essentially a form of internal alchemy. A skill he now found a way to transfer to the outer world through the insane idea of partly merging with a cauldron.

Jake felt how the Viper now finally noticed these small missing pieces and nearly instantly put two and two together. The first attempt at crafting failed, and a booklet appeared in front of his head. Villy looked at it as new words were burned into the paper as he added personal notes.

Four crafting attempts later, the Viper had created a new crafting method for healing potions. Jake had been merged with the Viper throughout and focused intensely on how the Viper had managed to fuse with the cauldron.

He felt parts akin to his upgraded Fang there, the part where a weapon effectively became an extension of his body. In fact, it was nearly identical. Aspects from Touch of the Malefic Viper were also present. All in all, Jake began to wonder if maybe a reason he had only gotten this vision now was that he needed to see the others first...

Not that it mattered now.

Jake understood the concept and was confident. The final part of the vision showed the Viper stopping the use of the skill as he unfused from the cauldron.

This resulted in the cauldron crumbling into ash the very next moment. As it did so, Villy felt a wave of exhaustion that Jake shared as the soul energy had effectively been

discarded. The lost mental energy was also immense, and Jake felt how the Viper's natural regeneration had faintly slowed due to his strained soul.

This was what Jake meant when he said risky. It was kind of like using a boosting skill during combat, just for alchemy. There would be a backlash, and so would there for Jake if he used this new application. The thing is... did he really have to go as far as the Viper did? Just with it being Soulbound and some of the concepts Villy applied should yield some results...

Just as he thought that, time rewound, and he started over from when the Viper had his epiphany. Without having to focus on anything else, Jake felt everything. He tried to truly be one with the Viper and experienced what Villy experienced.

It only took one more rewind before he fully got it.

[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper's greed for natural treasures is neverending. You are following his path for your senses to see all that you desire. Your desire to know the suffering you bring upon your foes has brought you even further down this path. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. Passively provides 1 Perception per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your gaze scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours.

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[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper's greed for natural treasures is neverending; his desire to discover all the world has to offer ceaseless. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities. Allows you to temporarily merge a part of your soul into a Soulbound cauldron or similar crafting device, making it effectively act as part of your body. Even without fully merging your soul, you will still receive all sensory benefits from using a Soulbound cauldron or similar crafting device. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. All effects of Sense of the Malefic Viper are further improved within the body of the alchemist. Passively provides 3 Perception per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your gaze scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours; may all truths lay bare before you.

As always, a bit of flavor text had changed, but it mostly remained the same. The changes were as expected, with it now adding the part about merging a part of his soul with a Soulbound cauldron, but he was happy to see that it still retained all sensory benefits even without merging himself with it. Jake innately felt that the only reason to merge with the cauldron was for Palate absorption.

Finally, it also had an increased effect within his body now. Jake didn't really see this part be that useful to him, but hey, it was there and was kind of another argument for merging with a cauldron. Oh, and of course, the expected bonus to Perception from upgrading the skill, and with his level, it was a lot of Perception. 200 Perception, to be exact, and that was before all percentage bonuses, meaning it was, in reality, 350.

Of course, this was only the math because of one more detail...

Jake had finally reached level 199 in his profession – the peak of D-grade.

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

Chapter 568: A Feathery Reunion

Jake was still within the vision of the Viper repeatedly doing alchemy but no longer focused much on it. As odd as it was to say, then Jake didn't really have much to learn from the current Viper within this Record Fragment. Jake was better than him already when it came to making potions, and he had already seen all he needed to see during the first few rewinds.

Checking his notifications, Jake saw the level-up.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 199 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 197 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

197, Jake thought. He could almost taste the evolution now. With this level and his reaching the peak of D-grade, he also got one more thing: his very first evolution quest. Jake checked it, and if he was being honest, it was pretty much exactly what he expected.

Profession Evolution Quest

To walk the Path of a Heretic-Chosen is to not simply be given but to claim the power of your Patron. With every step, you move closer to the Malefic One, yet you remain a heretic, unswayed by the Records of a Primordial as they fail to supersede your being. Go forth, claim the Legacy of the Malefic Viper and make his Records yours to wield.

Objective: Upgrade skills related to the Legacy of the Malefic Viper to legendary rarity (8/6)

Jake had already completed it. It could be called anti-climactic, but as mentioned, Jake had expected this outcome. Why wouldn't he have?

Evolution quests were not about pushing the person to their limit – it was to test that the person had reached the expected achievements of the class or profession. If it required Jake to do something insane for even him, all it would have been proof of was that Jake had not lived up to expectations during his journey to C-grade.

Not that this one was easy... it required Jake to upgrade at least six skills to legendary, and based on the "8/6," it seemed to still count more upgrades he got now. He read that as an indication that the system still recognized him upgrading more as part of the quest. Especially because the quest was still there and had not just been completed automatically.

Jake knew he could evolve his profession there and then if he wanted. Needless to say, he had no interest in this as he was aiming for the Perfect Evolution and also wanted to upgrade the last skill anyway.

Smiling to himself, Jake closed the quest menu just as he felt the vision was also about to end. He had barely been paying attention and still found himself merged with the Viper, but as had happened before... the vision extended a bit beyond the usual during this final time.

Still merged with the Viper, Jake felt the would-be Primordial's happiness at his success, and he celebrated a bit by himself. Jake just smiled alongside Villy, happy for his buddy's success, even if it was just a peek into history. Yet, mere moments before the vision ended, he felt something observing him – observing Villy.

A powerful presence that Villy did not at all notice but that Jake naturally picked up on. A familiar gaze that Jake had felt during a previous vision.

The First Sage?

The vision ended just as Jake became sure of the source and returned to the real world.

Scarlett felt all giddy as she guided the Chosen around the Mangrove. The thought of getting invited to the sacred Order of the Malefic Viper had never even crossed her mind, but the more she considered it, the more excited she became.

The Chosen was also nice and allowed her to stay with him during his visit to the Mangrove. She knew she had much to learn from him and would observe his every action whenever she could. Scarlett also noticed how the other humans of the Mangrove looked at him, and she felt their emotions. Their odd mix of emotions.

Fear and nervousness were two of the strongest senses other humans got from watching the Chosen. It was only right to feel fear before a superior being, and she could only approve of their understanding to not approach and needlessly annoy or delay the Chosen in his matters.

After he was done with his business, they went to the largest building in the Mangrove, where she led the Chosen to a room for him to meditate in. He did also make some weird comments along the way... like asking for her to bite him...

She didn't get it. Was physical contact not rather shunned by humans? Also, did he really trust her that much to allow her to use her venom on him? It was all a bit too much for her, and she was happy that he decided to meditate for a while so she could observe him a bit longer.

But... not long into meditation, she felt something. An odd shift in the environment as whispers of a presence that did not belong on a small planet like Earth appeared. Her eyes opened wide as she recognized it and stared wide-eyed at the Chosen as her heart began pounding from the pressure. Then, at the very next moment, he disappeared, leaving only a lingering presence behind.

Scarlett tried to calm herself down, but she could not stop herself from shaking. That had been the presence of the Malefic One... the Forefather of her entire race. What had the Chosen done? It was like he, for a moment, became the Forefather himself, their Paths and Records uniting.

Not long passed before he reemerged, the aura still present for a moment before it dispersed like it had never been there, leaving only the Chosen deep in thought...

Jake kept frowning as he sat in the main office in the Mangrove. Why had the First Sage looked at Villy? How had he been aware of him? Villy's description said that the first time they met was when the Viper tried to sneak in and learn from the First Sage, but this vision said otherwise. Or maybe it didn't, at least not from the perspective of the Viper.

Villy was not omniscient, and Jake began to suspect that his choice of seeking out the First Sage had more to it than the Viper knew. Had he been led into seeking out the man? If so, for what purpose? Did he just want someone to kill him, like Villy said?

Leave a student, perhaps? Something entirely different Jake had no damn clue about? This update is available on **novel*fire*net**

All were likely, with the final one being the most likely. Shaking his head, Jake decided not to mull it over too much. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to ask Villy about it... maybe it was just better to keep it to himself and hope that a future vision could give some insight. Villy clearly cared a lot about this First Sage, and Jake didn't want to pollute a memory for no reason. Yeah, best keep it to himself and return to more current matters.

Jake opened his eyes and addressed the snake girl in the room, who was staring at him with wide-open starry eyes.

"I... I felt the presence of the Forefather. What happened? Did you go see the Malefic One?" she asked with much interest.

"You can say that," Jake smiled. "I used one of my skills as a Chosen, that is all."

She just nodded enthusiastically. "Thank you for allowing me to witness it! I will never forget this honor."

Jake smirked and shook his head, not having the heart to tell her that he just didn't really see any reason to hide something like this. She knew he was the Chosen already, so him doing Chosen stuff was just to be expected.

Oh, and finally... Jake kept forgetting that part that blasted out the presence of himself and the Viper whenever he used the skill. In his defense, he had not actually planned on just using the skill right away, but when he focused on stuff, he kind of tended to forget everything and everyone around him, with it already having led to outing himself to everything from friends in the Order to projections within dungeons.

"Would you mind if I did some alchemy?" Jake then asked the snake girl. It was more a rhetorical question as she, of course, instantly nodded.

"Thank you, I plan on staying here for a bit before heading back to Haven before the World Congress," Jake informed her, Scarlett naturally not voicing even a sliver of negativity.

Jake smiled again at her and decided to get some practice in with his new skill, and he had just the thing to craft: Perception Elixirs. He did have some already in storage, but he wanted to craft some more before he evolved anyway. He had three hundred stats to get and saw no reason not to claim them right away. Could he increase other stats? Sure, but Jake wanted Perception.

He also still had some materials in store, so he could get started right away. The moment Jake summoned the cauldron and laid his hands on it, he instantly felt the

difference from the newly upgraded skill. It was like everything within the cauldron appeared clearer than before, even if it was currently empty.

With a mental command, Jake manipulated the very air within it. He felt the different affinities and, out of curiosity, focused on them. Water, wind, space, time, nature, wood.... so many affinities he recognized. Jake chose one as he strained himself, and in the middle of the cauldron, a small droplet of water began to condense as Jake extracted the humidity from the air.

Definitely noticeable, Jake concluded as he got to work.

Adding the ingredients, he tried to discern what the difference truly was. In all honesty, the upgrade did not help much during crafting like this, as there really weren't many details he couldn't already catch with his Perception. It was far more effective during experimenting, that was for sure. He also faintly considered trying out the soul-merging effect but decided against it as his intuition warned him of the outcome.

Villy had destroyed his cauldron, and while Jake was confident the Altmar Cauldron would survive, he was certain it would be damaged and be in need of repair afterward. It had the rune on the bottom to accomplish this, but it would take time, and as mentioned, he didn't need it.

Jake thus just dove into the alchemy as time passed. Scarlett stayed by his side silently for nearly two days, simply staring at everything he did with interest. She was damn lucky Jake had been conditioned by Villy's constant staring, allowing him to completely ignore it and make plenty of elixirs.

Once it was about time to head back to Haven, Jake went on a drinking binge.

You have assimilated a strong energy of Perception.

+5 Perception.

You have assimilated a strong energy of Perception.

+5 Perception.

You have...

Elixir after elixir went down and seeing as he had enough, he even offered some to Scarlett. She graciously accepted but only wanted a single one, which was a bit weird. Especially as she looked to have no interest in drinking the elixir but simply held onto it for a while before storing it away.

Another easy 300 Perception in the bag, Jake smiled after he was done drinking. Over just a few days, Jake had gotten around one thousand more Perception from the skill

upgrade, elixirs, and Free Points, making him feel quite good about himself. Jake knew that stat distribution also greatly impacted evolutions, and he wanted to make it absolutely clear to the system that he was a Perception-based guy.

At least, that is what he told himself to excuse his decision.

"Thanks for accommodating me," Jake said to Scarlett as he prepared to head back. "After the World Congress, I will come back here, and we will travel for the Order of the Malefic Viper, so make your preparations, alright?"

"Yes!" Scarlett enthusiastically nodded. "Will you need me to do or bring anything in particular?"

"I won't need you to bring anything, but we do need to talk about a few details related to my identity at the Order, but that can wait," Jake answered.

"Very well," she acknowledged. "I once more thank the Chosen for blessing us with his presence."

Jake waved it off. "That is part of what you will need to work on fixing. Be more casual, alright? Anyway, I am off!"

With that, Jake headed for the teleporter, with Scarlett still following him and bidding him goodbye.

A swift teleportation later, Jake found himself back at the Fort. The convenience of these teleporters was truly, well, convenient, even for someone like Jake, who had quite the insane travel speed. Jake still chose to fly back towards Haven, not because it would be in any way faster, but because he had already felt the aura approach, and he decided to meet halfway. As for who this presence was?

It was a small green ball of feathery death.

They had been apart for a long time. Thinking about it, this was probably their longest separation since the little featherball had been born.

His grin only grew as he flew forward and felt her approach pretty fucking fast. She had gotten a lot swifter, that was for sure, and it did not take long before he saw the small green form enter his vision and barrel straight toward him.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvi 199]

She had reached the peak of D-grade, something entirely expected. Jake stopped in mid-air and opened his arm wide to hug the bird. However, Sylphie had other plans and expertly dodged his attempt, flying in between his hands and dodging beneath his legs before doing a quick circle, landing perfectly on top of his head.

Sylphie stood proudly as if she had reclaimed her rightful place, and Jake nearly failed to hold back a laugh as he raised a hand and nuzzled her. "It's been a while, eh?"

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched in complaint, making Jake indeed fail to hold back his laugh. "I missed you too."

She showed mercy and allowed Jake to lift her off his head and give her a hug. Sylphie had not changed in the slightest since they separated. Well, besides getting a lot stronger and making Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper now pick up how the wind mana itself seemed to change in her vicinity.

"Did you have fun with your adventures?" he asked, still holding the small hawk in his arms like she was a newborn baby.

"Ree! Ree!" she semi-explained as Jake play-fought with her talons.

"Lots of strong beasts, huh?" Jake nodded. "Managed to take down some C-grades?"

Sylphie proudly screeched in affirmation as she went on a tirade of screeches explaining what had happened. Jake nodded along, still unsure how the hell he understood what she meant. She had gone to the cloud layer where C-grades lived and managed to defeat a few C-grades while hunting with Carmen.

Speaking of Carmen... "Where did you leave Carmen? Isn't she also here?"

"Ree!"

"She isn't that slow."

"Ree!"

"Okay, she is a little slow," Jake laughed in agreement as the hawk insisted.

Feeling victorious, Sylphie once more brought the topic back to her adventures, Jake listening intently as he continued to nod along while slowly flying back towards Haven, and he at least managed to extract the fact that Carmen was back there talking with the Sword Saint, Miranda, and Arthur.

Oh... and two others who had also come back to Haven for a visit. Two hawks Jake hadn't seen for even longer than Sylphie: her parents, Hawkie and Mystie.

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

Chapter 569: The Eve Before the Third World Congress

Hawkie and Mystie had been busy birds as far as Jake knew. His visits to Haven had just never really intersected with when they visited, and after Sylphie left with him and Carmen, the two hawks bothered visiting even less as they didn't really have any reason to go.

Instead, they focused on leveling, hunting as a pair in the sky and in the vast forest Haven was on the outskirts of. Jake knew that neither of them were particularly strong for their levels, but they weren't weak either. He would place them firmly in the mid-to-high-tier level of beast variants, primarily due to Mystie's unique type of magic and Hawkie's high striking power. Together they were especially strong with their developed combo-attacks and skills, bringing them firmly in the high-tier category.

Yet, even knowing this, Jake was surprised when he saw them from afar as the two of them waited on a branch just at the entrance to the forest.

[Stormsong Hawk – lvl 178]

[Mystsong Hawk – lvl 176]

You go, mate! Jake thought when he saw Hawkie had surpassed Mystie in level. It did make sense; Mystie was more of a supportive fighter, with Hawkie being the one going in and dealing most of the damage. But, damn, them both having reached such a high level so fast was impressive to him.

Neither of them were living cheats like Jake, Sylphie, or most of the other people around him. They were just kind-of-strong beasts. Well, okay, that wasn't entirely accurate. They were the parents of Sylphie, and in the same way that Jake's parents benefitted with Records by being his parents, so did Hawkie and Mystie benefit from Sylphie. Them being friends with Jake also helped them quite a bit, though Jake reckoned their relationship with Sylphie meant more. Then again, Sylphie benefitted a lot by being close to Jake, so he did help quite a bit by proxy?

Anyway, Records were complicated, and even if he helped, it was still their own effort that brought them to high-tier D-grade.

Jake smiled as he saw them and raised a hand to wave. Sylphie remained cradled in his arms, clearly content with not having to move as Jake flew over to her parents.

Mystie looked a bit judging down at her daughter while Hawkie flew down towards him. What looked like a fork of lightning appeared and floated in mid-air in front of Jake as Hawkie landed on it at eye height with Jake.

"Good to see you again, mate," Jake greeted the hawk. His first monster friend, if you didn't count the King.

Hawkie simply nodded his head and looked at Jake holding Sylphie.

"Does feel a bit bad to be surpassed by your own daughter, huh?" Jake asked.

To his surprise, Hawkie didn't agree. Quite the opposite. Jake felt only happiness at how strong Sylphie was, with not a shred of jealousy. This only made Jake smile more. *Here's to healthy family dynamics.*

What was the saying... Jake couldn't remember, but he remembered the gist of it. Celebrate the success of others and mourn their losses. Feeling jealous or angry because someone you proclaimed to care about experienced success was just a sign of you being an egotistical asshole. It was fine to feel a bit miffed, sure, but that should be trumped by the happiness of seeing someone you care about succeed.

"Or maybe not," Jake corrected himself as he looked down at Sylphie and nuzzled the feathers on her stomach. Like an angry cat, she fought back with her talons, but Jake just grinned as he adeptly dodged them to tickle her. "She sure has grown, eh?"

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched in agreement as Hawkie just gave a slight nod. Hawkie was as reserved as ever, and Mystie still seemed a bit cautious around Jake even after all this time. At least she seemed happy to stay at a distance and just observe what happened.

"Should we head back?" Jake asked. "You can tell me what you two have been up to in the meantime. How about you join us too, Mystie?"

He looked up at the hawk with a smile. She quickly relented, not due to Jake, but the wide eyes of Sylphie staring up at her, making her fly down and join them as they slowly made their way through the forest. He already kind of knew what Hawkie and the others had been doing and what they hunted, but it was always good to hear it from the primary source.

The two of them had mainly focused on safe hunts and not biting off more than they could chew. Mystie was damn good at stealth by now, from what he gathered, and allowed them to ambush foes or escape areas with dangerous monsters they could not beat. Jake also came to learn that, apparently, the massive lightning tree in the sky had died several months ago after Hawkie had gone for a round of absorption. That made Jake a bit sad until he heard Sylphie chip in about how there were many more of those trees up in the higher cloud layers where C-grades lived. Bigger ones, too, making Jake wonder where the hell they came from.

With more than one, he could only assume it was some breed of a tree. He had assumed that the massive lightning tree had been the "main tree" and the smaller

crystal trees spread around were its seedlings, but now Jake began to wonder... what if the big one had also just been another seedling itself? Did this mean there was some massive awesome lightning tree somewhere?

Anywho, the two proud hawk parents had explored far more of the forest than anyone else. Jake had already known that C-grades existed deep in the forest, but they had indeed confirmed their presence and how there were a lot of them. Needless to say, Hawkie and Mystie were not equipped to fight C-grades quite yet, even if they had gotten a lot stronger.

They had an enjoyable talk as they made their way back to Haven, Mystie even joining in and adding some information with images made of Myst here and there.

Soon enough, they reached Haven, Jake feeling the many presences within. Everyone had gathered, it seemed, the group now also including Carmen. He did not detect another monster with the King but kind of assumed he had thought of one. Not that it mattered, they could always find this last council member after Jake was World Leader.

Jake waltzed into the main office, still holding Sylphie. However, she seemed to want to keep her dignity as she wrestled herself free and flew up to land on top of his head to prove her dominance. Jake cracked a smile as he entered the room, and everyone looked at him.

"I apologize for my late arrival, but I have to announce a change in plans. Going by hierarchy, it has become clear to me that the true leader of Earth should not be me but the mighty Sylphie," Jake joked with a wide grin.

"Sold," Carmen answered with a smirk.

"Wouldn't it be the same? Not like you plan on actually doing any work," Miranda shrugged.

"I have no complaints either," even the Sword Saint chimed in.

The King did not even dignify his joke with a response, while Arthur looked genuinely confused for a few moments before realizing it was just a bad joke.

"Thanks for the support and confidence, everyone," Jake chuckled as he went to take a seat. Hawkie and Mystie had both chosen to stay outside and had flown towards the good old lodge. Probably to steal his bananas.

"Let us get to work," Miranda cut in to actually get something done.

"Arthur was just telling us how he has spread the word of our arrangement, and despite quite a bit of pushback, things seem to be on track, with most understanding the nuance

of the situation and choosing to support us. During the Congress itself, we should be able to convince the rest by actually displaying a united front," Miranda explained.

"As for the Noboru Clan, things have mostly calmed down," the Sword Saint sighed. "There shall at least be no opposition to voting you World Leader."

"We have claimed more Pylons and expanded, and naturally, all shall vote according to my will," the King said. "When it comes to this final member of the council, I have attempted to seek out this whale you spoke of, but I ran into an obstacle."

"Oh?" Jake asked, surprised. "What's wrong?"

"You asked me to find a sea creature in a vague direction, one living far away in an area filled with C-grades that you expect me to hopelessly search through with a damaged soul," the King explained very aptly.

"So what you are saying is that you suck at tracking and stealth. Got it. I guess I will just have to call the divine hotline to try and get this whale guy on board. After the Congress, of course," Jake smiled.

"I congratulate myself for not wasting my time on such a pointless task, then," the King scoffed before falling silent.

"I guess it's my turn?" Carmen spoke up after a brief pause. "Eh, those from Valhal will vote for you; at least Sven, that bastard, told me so. He also told me to apologize to you, so I am sorry that Sven and the moronic moron higher-ups fucked up like the morons they are."

"Apology accepted," Jake said with a nod. "Partly. Valhal is not getting out of this scot-free, but we can talk about what form of compensation I find agreeable. Quite frankly, it wouldn't matter if they refused to vote for me anymore, does it?"

"No, it does not," Miranda confirmed. "Based on my estimates, you sit on well over eighty percent of the total votes. Remember that many of the nobles who are on the fence are only Lords with their one vote while we have all higher-level nobles on our side."

"See? Even if Valhal decides to be assholes again, we're good," Jake said to Carmen.

Carmen looked offended for a moment but then took a deep breath. "I had nothing to do with what they did. I didn't even hear anything about that orange fuck or that bullshit Alliance before everything had already happened."

"I know that," Jake said comfortingly. "But Valhal still needs to pay some kind of recompense. I am sure Sven already predicted this?"

“Probably did,” Carmen answered. “I didn’t really listen to much of what he said after he told me to go apologise. Ask him at the Congress. It is his damn fault for asking me to act as a diplomat like this.”

“Fair enough,” Jake nodded as he turned to Miranda again. “Anything from the Risen at all?”

“No,” Miranda shook her head. “But I did confer with my Patrons, and it appears like they have left Earth for good. Which was, according to them, probably better for everyone involved.”

Jake frowned. “Why?”

“Well... while the Risen do usually go the diplomatic route, the end result is often still the total domination of any planet they operate on, including eventual terraforming. Chances are they would have left by themselves at some point anyway or only left a small outpost at most,” Miranda explained. “At least they would have gone for another planet nearby to make their own and not actually remained on Earth.”

Her explanation reminded him of the final force he wanted to ask about: “What about the Church? They still have some cities, as far as I recall.”

“Kind of?” Miranda said. “It is more just City Lords refusing to accept what happened and still waiting for the Church to call for them. They have fallen one by one in the last month, and only a scarce few remain, all of them in minor settlements of little importance. No, the biggest problem is the refugees from all the major cities, especially Sanctdomo.”

Jake once more nodded, knowing there was quite a refugee crisis going on. If the King had not managed to rein in the monsters and their attacks dying down, things would have gotten far worse. The cities the Church used to own were primarily taken by the United Cities Alliance, with the Noboru Clan and even Valhal managing to snatch up a few.

The meeting continued for a bit longer, but there really wasn’t much to discuss ahead of this World Congress. They didn’t even know what kind of votes would happen besides the one for World Leader, so it was impossible to discuss that. All in all, everything was set, and Jake decided to head back to his lodge to chill with the hawks.

Carmen decided to follow him, something he definitely didn’t complain about. It was good to hear about the adventures of her and Sylphie with actual human words. The fact that neither Mystie, Hawkie, or Sylphie spoke actual words using telepathy or something like that surprised him a bit, but then again, did they have to? The only one Hawkie and Mystie seemed to care about talking to was Jake, and he understood them. And if they didn’t bother learning telepathy, he also doubted they would rush to get human forms.

In fact, it wasn't that unusual for beasts to never bother getting a human form. A human form had no value for a monster living in the wild and was, in many ways, only a weakness. It also took quite a bit of skill and time to create a usable one, making many lower-tier creatures simply give up and never bother. Then, finally, there was the fact that many beasts saw the human form as inferior and it as a slight to their honor to adopt one for even a second. Villy once told a funny story about why all dragons always chose to retain draconic features in their human form without having to: because they were braggarts who wanted anyone even catching a glimpse of them to still know they were indeed dragons. He didn't think Mystie and Hawkie were like that, but it was still a toss-up if they bothered to make one when they reached C-grade.

They also had the advantage of their small forms, allowing them to still travel around places built for human-sized individuals. Big beasts not fitting into human-sized houses was by far one of the primary reasons for human forms being such a widely-adopted concept.

As they entered the valley, Jake was thrown out of his thoughts as he saw the two hawks again, having indeed stolen some of his bananas. They were lucky he was in a good mood and couldn't scold parents in front of their own kid.

"Hey... are you ready to evolve soon?" Carmen asked him after they had gotten into the lodge and settled down at the table.

Jake finally identified her and saw that at least she was. Fresh chapters posted on **novel·fire·net**

[Human – lvl 193]

"Yeah, pretty damn close; I just need some class levels. And I got some stuff I want to finish beforehand," Jake answered.

"Your class?" Carmen asked with surprise. "I only need levels in my profession... been kind of slow recently. Didn't really feel like dedicating kills to Valhal or doing any of their bullshit rituals after they lied and tried to screw over my home planet."

"Fair," Jake nodded. "But in their defense, I don't think Valhal actually tried to screw Earth over, and from my understanding, some complicated shit is just going on between a bunch of gods."

"Why would you bother defending them after just talking about wanting compensation?" Carmen asked with a frown.

Jake just smiled. "I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I know stuff. Secret stuff."

"Ass," she shot back.

“I do have one of those, yes,” Jake confirmed with a stupid grin.

“Assho... ah, never mind. So, what the hell have you been up to? I don’t know shit compared to everyone else, it feels like,” Carmen complained.

“Oh man...”

Jake once more narrated what had happened, including everything with Sandy and his journey across the planet. Sylphie and the other hawks stayed for a part of it until all three of them left to have some quality family time terrorizing the local wildlife, leaving just Carmen and Jake back at the lodge.

“Fucking Ell’Hakan. Dude is definitely coming back to make trouble, isn’t he?” Carmen said after Jake was done talking.

“No doubt,” Jake nodded. “Though I don’t know if he will mess with Earth again or just aim for me directly. Maybe a mix of both. Either way, I will handle him later. For now, I got too much other stuff to take care of.”

“I guess,” Carmen said before groaning. “Why does shit have to be complicated? Can’t we just have proper villains who show up and challenge you directly or something like that?”

“That would definitely be preferable,” Jake smiled. “I much prefer when people can just be direct and cut all the bullshit.”

“Agree,” Carmen nodded.

They were both silent for a few seconds before Jake scratched the back of his head. “You know, we got at least a few hours before the World Congress and nothing to do.”

Carmen smiled. “I thought you just said you preferred when people were direct?”

“Other people,” Jake clarified.

“God damn hypocrite,” Carmen laughed before dragging him outside the lodge for a sparring session.

Followed by dragging him back inside for another kind of sparring session.

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Chapter 570: The Third World Congress

Jake and Carmen both lay on the grass in the valley outside of the lodge as they stared up at the sky, relaxing after their strenuous wrestling session.

“Why was it we couldn’t use the bed again?” Carmen turned to him and asked.

“That is a meditation bed,” Jake said stoically. “Also, it is super old and comes from a dungeon, and I didn’t wanna risk breaking it. Sentimental value and all that.”

“As long as you don’t feel the same about the table,” Carmen joked about the broken pieces of wood in the lodge as she sat up. “Should we get going? Also... aren’t the others going to start asking questions?”

Jake looked to the side and saw a part of the valley pretty damn banged up from their earlier spar, including quite a few craters. “Nah, I think they will just assume we only sparred. Does it matter either way?”

Carmen thought for a moment. “I guess not, but I would prefer for no stupid rumors to spread.”

“Oh, I already got those rumors related to Miranda and me,” Jake shrugged.

“Really?” Carmen asked, a bit surprised. “So have you-“

“Nah. Professional boundaries and all. Don’t wanna make things awkward with someone who effectively works for me,” Jake shrugged.

“Don’t wanna shit where you eat, huh?” Carmen nodded. “Though, as a Chosen, isn’t everyone below you in the hierarchy? And does your Patron give a fuck about professional boundaries?”

A vivid image of Villy with three witches flashed in his mind as he shook his head. “Oh, the Viper sure doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean I don’t. As for everyone being above me as Chosen, well, if I don’t think someone is below me and they don’t think I am above them, then who the fuck is to decide?”

“Truly masterfully argued,” Carmen smirked. “Now, let’s go to that office and get this entire World Congress bullshit done with.”

“Fine,” Jake agreed and stretched as he walked towards the main office. The others were already waiting there, and not long after, it was time. The invitations were sent out, and Jake agreed as his vision went black and he entered the Third World Congress.

The World Congress chamber hit Jake like a bag of bricks filled with nostalgia when he entered. His sphere spread out, and he could only sigh internally. Figures appeared all around him, but some people who had been at every other Congress were notably missing.

Sanctdomo and the Risen city that Jake didn't remember the name of were both gone from the top ten. Jacob and Casper were nowhere to be seen as it really got hammered home; they were both gone from Earth for good.

Another notable figure that was nowhere to be seen was Eron. Jake had kind of hoped to see him there, but his absence also confirmed for good that he had left Earth with likely no desire to return. His reason for leaving was still a mystery, and Jake wondered if he knew about Ell'Hakan coming or if it was totally unrelated. Either way, he was gone.

He did at least see some familiar figures he hadn't heard much about in the last month. Two people in particular. The first one was Maria, the fire archer who had been with Bertram and his party as a mercenary and had helped in the fight with the Monarch of Blood. She looked to be with an entirely different crew, and from what Jake could guess, she had split entirely from the Church.

The second person was someone Jake himself had told to be there but was still surprised to actually see. William stood on a platform way at the back of the room and looked unassuming as hell. His presence was oddly muted, and even if he had just appeared, Jake saw his eyes wide open as he looked deep in thought. He didn't get the feeling William would make any trouble, as he had far too many internal issues to deal with. At least he hadn't found his Path yet, judging by his level still being 199. In fact, scanning the room, no one at C-grade was present. A few were at level 199 here and there, but no one had evolved. What stumped them, he didn't know, but he guessed it was either natural barriers caused by Records or an issue with quests.

Standing there and scanning everything, it felt oddly hollow. So little mystery remained of who those unknown City Leaders were. All intrigue about hidden experts on the planet was killed. Besides a few odd rumors about standout individuals who didn't bother with politics, there really was nothing. His only hope was in the unexplored parts of the planet and what monsters may hide there.

Jake had appeared on the platform together with the usual suspects. He, Miranda, Lillian, and Neil attended from Haven just like all the other times, but all the others who had been in Haven appeared on their respective platforms. From what Jake gathered, the Sword Saint had given up control of his Pylon when he pretended to die to better sell the ruse but had now gone and reclaimed it without any opposition. Carmen and Arthur had also appeared at their original Pylon locations despite being in Haven.

He was still looking around as the welcome message appeared.

Welcome to the Third World Congress of Earth.

Two World Congresses have passed, and it is time for the final scheduled one.

The World Congress is an opportunity for the newly integrated denizens of Earth to establish political connections and an arena for discussion, voting, and international politics that can impact the planet as a whole. Note that no fighting will be allowed during the World Congress. Each booth has an aura that will offer privacy to each city.

During the Third World Congress, two votes will be held with a maximum length of five (5) hours per vote. After one vote finishes, the other will immediately begin. During this World Congress, a World Leader must be elected, and if none has managed to accumulate 60% of the total votes, the candidates shall be cut down and options limited until the World Leader is elected.

The first vote will pertain to the election of a World Leader. The World Leader will automatically have their noble rank advance one stage and must be elected during this World Congress. The Second Vote pertains to the final trial of the enlightened races on Earth.

The first vote will automatically begin in thirty (30) minutes.

Jake read it over and saw only minor changes from the last time. More freedom with voting periods, an inclusion that the World Leader must be elected, and finally, information about the vote for a final trial of some kind?

Everyone read it, and Jake also double-checked that the voting rules had not changed since last year.

Voting rules of the World Congress:

The number of available votes is based on the nobility rank of the attending members. The number of votes per nobility rank is as follows:

King: 1000

Prince: 250

Duke: 100

Marquiss: 25

Earl: 10

Viscount: 5

Baron: 3

Lord: 1

The noble in question may distribute their votes as they choose if there are multiple options. The noble may abstain from voting. Votes are final and cannot be appealed. Any agreements will come into effect until the next World Congress or if all included parties choose to revoke it. All tie-breakers will be decided by the highest-ranking noble present at the World Congress.

It was the exact same as last year, indeed. Jake still questioned how and why prince was a thing considering the prince was usually the son of the King, but hey, who was he to question the omnipotent system?

Jake also knew that he would advance to marquiss after this vote. It was still a bit odd that he, as the World Leader, would still be three entire nobility ranks below the Fallen King, but there wasn't really anything he could do about it. Unique Lifeforms were pretty bullshit like that.

Also, no, the King could not give others nobility ranks. The nobility title of the King was a bit of a weird case in more than one way. Monsters could not have nobility ranks, but despite that, the King had one, which also did make it kind of funny when the system talked to everyone within the Congress like they were among the enlightened races.

After Jake had read through everything, including the usual prompt to vote for World Leader, he turned his attention back to all those in the chamber. He felt many gazes upon him and knew what he had to do. Miranda had told him many times, and sometimes he still had to do a bit of politics. With a mental command, Jake made his mask invisible and clapped his hands together to get everyone's attention.

"So here we are again at the third World Congress, but we all know this one is quite a bit different than the first two. With how things have gone in recent times, how couldn't it be?" Jake spoke, the speech only semi-practiced. He was mostly just winging it. Seemed more genuine that way.

"Enemies were invited onto our planet due to naivety, ignorance, stupidity, and deceit. Millions died due to the decisions of a few, and countless more now find themselves struggling from the aftermath. As I am sure you can all see, the Risen are gone. I knew many of you didn't like them, but out of everyone, they were one of the most peaceful factions. At the same time, the Holy Church has also chosen to leave. Why, you might ask? Because they realized their goal of world domination was not feasible, and they were the kinds of people who either want everything or nothing," Jake continued, seeing a few frowns here and there. Probably the idiots who still believed in the Church.

"Another question you might have is who this invader was. I am aware most of you have no idea, so let me clarify. His name is Ell'Hakan, an alien who has already dominated

his home planet and is the Chosen of Yip of Yore, an incredibly powerful god that even the Pantheon of the Holy Church is wary of. His reason for coming here quite honestly had nothing to do with any of you. He never cared about Earth. He came for me."

A bit of chatter was heard here and there, but Jake raised a hand.

"I know, I know. Rumor has no doubt gone around that I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, an even more feared god than Yip of Yore and one with quite the, let's just say, reputation. I do realize it is somewhat my own fault for not really bothering with letting more be known about myself that you all think I am some evil bastard, but I hope that you have come to realize I have no desire to lead Earth down a bad Path. I just want the planet to survive and be defended, nothing more. That is also what most of you want: for Earth to remain independent, but you must also realize that simply isn't possible. Without backing, we are like a poor country with pointy sticks trying to defend ourselves from global superpowers. And not just any small, impoverished country, but one with a shitload of oil that everyone wants."

Even more chatter, only a handful of people with some muted chuckling. All of them were people Jake knew, sadly. *The joke did not land.*

"What I am saying is that Earth would be fucked without someone big and scary to intimidate multiversal forces. Arthur, the former leader of the newly dissolved United Cities Alliance, tried to have Valhal be this big scary force, but needless to say, his plans fell apart and were built on a foundation of lies and naivety. However, through talks with Arthur, I came to realize that we do want the same thing, so I am proposing that we use my backing as the deterrent. That we use my identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as a shield. Again, I know a lot of you are probably skeptical of this idea, but the Order will have no influence on the planet," Jake explained.

There were still a lot of skeptics in the hall, but Jake continued nevertheless.

"Instead, Earth will be led by a council of five, me not included. I have no interest in actually leading anything. Thus, everything will be up to their discretion, with me only getting involved in matters I care about or find important. The same way as I have led Haven thus far. And before anyone asks, let me just address the question of why I then don't just make someone else the World Leader and sit on the council. The easy answer to that one: because I don't want to. Because if there is one thing I want less than to become World Leader, it is for someone else to become World Leader," Jake grinned. "Anyway, that was my big speech. I will now take questions."

"How will you-"

"What are-"

"If you-"

People instantly began yelling, and Jake raised a hand to silence them again. "That was a damn joke; I am not actually answering any questions. If you want to know more, ask the people on the council. After the vote."

"Are we not even gonna dignify a discussion of alternatives? Not even going to act like this is the democratic election it is?" someone with a particularly loud voice yelled. Jake did not recognize them at all and just shrugged.

"Not really, no. Not gonna lie; you people are way out of your depths by even being here. Didn't you hear what I said? Gods decided to fight over our planet. Beings who can blow it up with a wave of their hand. Does anyone here really think they can do shit to defend Earth? The answer is no. This is not a democratic election either, and I bet you that after this vote, we will come to learn that there are more violent ways of attaining the title of World Leader. I hope that anyone open to being voted for is also fine with having a constant mark on them. People who are not just from Earth will come after you. That is another reason I think I am the best candidate. I welcome my would-be-assassins," Jake answered confidently.

His response seemed to shut down the guy as Arthur spoke up. Just as planned.

"What Lord Thayne is saying is that he will act as a shield for Earth from the multiverse. Outside forces will hesitate even having machinations on Earth due to fear of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper being the World Leader there. Assassins who would be interested in Earth would not dare risk offending the Order by attempting to assassinate him. In addition, they will fear killing anyone they perceive to be working for him out of fear. His role will be nearly entirely passive, and from my understanding, he will not even be on Earth for the majority of the time," Arthur said, looking over at Jake.

"True, I will not. I have a multiverse to explore," Jake confirmed.

Jake didn't really think there needed to be more talk, but damn, was he wrong. He had been warned beforehand, but it was still annoying that it happened. Even if they had the vast majority of votes and they could just vote instantly and make him World Leader once that first half an hour ended, they still freaking talked. However, the four council members had made it clear that simply brute-forcing the vote was a bad idea.

Instead, they wanted to bring everyone there on board with their decision. Jake could only sigh and sit back as he allowed the council members to show their prowess and convince everyone. Especially the Fallen King had some heavy lifting to do before he would get a proper approval rating.

The only ones with good approval ratings were Arthur and, surprisingly, the Sword Saint. Arthur because of his former status and existing connections, and the Sword Saint because... well, Jake would describe it as old-man energy. Who would dare disagree with an old man's wisdom? Plus, he just seemed authoritative whenever he

spoke, making everyone subconsciously agree and take all his advice as sagely. Again, old-man powers.

Miranda was also working hard, primarily in the department of convincing everyone that while the Order was pretty damn evil by human standards, then it was not the Order but Jake taking charge and how those things were different. Everyone on the council was working damn hard.

As for Jake? This chapter is updated by **novel·fire·net**

Jake was fighting the temptation to just zone it all out and just do some damn alchemy like all the other political events...

Luckily, it was soon time for the vote and for Jake to finally get to see what one got out of becoming World Leader. As long as he could stay awake long enough, that is.

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Chapter 571: Earth's Final Trial

After half an hour, the prompt appeared to vote for World Leader. Jake opened it and saw that it, too, was the same as every other time.

Please place your vote for World Leader of Earth. You have 10 votes and can distribute them as you desire or choose to abstain with any or all of your votes.

Votes remaining: 10/10

Time remaining: 4:29:59

Jake naturally dumped all votes on himself instantly while the others continued talking. And damn, did they continue to talk. A lot of people just voted right away from the looks of it, but as far as Jake could tell, the voting period would only end once all votes had been made. Jake would naturally prefer for them to just get things over with, but all he could do was wait as the negotiations happened.

In the meantime, he stood there valiantly as he, in reality, zoned out and entered his Soulspace using Serene Soul Meditation while still keeping an eye on the outside world using his sphere. In there, he discussed future matters and plans with sim-Jake for a good while until finally they got done, and in the least suspenseful vote for World Leader Jake could imagine, he got the title... which wasn't even a damn title.

The election of World Leader has now concluded!

Results: Jake Thayne has been elected World Leader with 93% of the total votes.

Congratulations! You have been elected World Leader.

As a World Leader, you gain access to certain special privileges and abilities.

Due to the previous vote for Paths of Unusual Unions, the World Leader can formally invite native monsters of any grade into protected lands.

Allows the World Leader to announce future World Congresses.

Allows you to appoint a maximum of five (5) Ministers and delegate responsibility.

Allows the World Leader to lay claim to any area controlled by Pylons.

Allows the World Leader to...

...

More privileges and abilities will be revealed after the conclusion of Earth's final trial if the World Leader manages to fully take control of the planet.

Jake read the many messages that popped up in front of him but ended up skimming most of them as he quite frankly didn't care about most of what they said. He adopted the same attitude as he had towards Haven. All of these things were for the council to figure out after he appointed the five Ministers and got everything delegated out.

There was also a pleasant surprise he had not expected. Jake had not thought much of the Unusual Unions vote and knew it had just resulted in some more interesting classes and professions popping up, but the positive working relationship between humans and monsters had kind of been ruined by the actions of William and Ell'Hakan. It was recovering now, but it would take time.

So to see that it had resulted in Jake gaining a very useful ability was awesome. If he read it correctly, it meant that he could now remove the restrictions C-grades had so they could go everywhere, allowing him to finally invite people like Sandy or Scarlett to Haven without any problems. That was definitely a great bonus.

Finally, there was the section about a final trial also mentioned in the welcome message to the Congress. Jake did not ponder on this much as he could just wait for the vote that was shortly upcoming that would no doubt include far more information on this trial.

He also checked and saw that his nobility title had been upgraded.

Titled Upgraded: [Nobility: Earl] --> [Nobility: Marquess]

[Nobility: Marquess] – A noble who has been voted World Leader and begun his true Path of planetary domination. Allows you to control several Pylons of Civilization as well as claim control of Planetary Pylons. Grants access to certain events and opportunities exclusive to nobles. Opens many new paths to power

Jake read it through and saw some interesting things, especially the note about Planetary Pylons. If a Pylon of Civilization was made to claim and form a city, then the Planetary Pylon was made to claim a planet. It more or less functioned as the mainframe and primary controller of all other Pylons on a planet. It was kind of a natural upgrade to see, considering the message about this final trial.

All in all not much had really changed from him becoming World Leader. Anyone with any kind of political aspirations or skills would probably vehemently disagree with him, but overall, Jake saw no real gains. He had to admit a part of him had selfishly hoped that by becoming World Leader, he would get some kind of new title or at least some passive bonus to stats or something while on the planet he supposedly led. Alas, stuff like that was probably reserved for people with social professions. If Jake had to guess, all he would really gain was another option to skip over during his evolution.

Even if it wasn't a big deal to Jake, others seemed to disagree as all eyes were on him. *Oh... I probably have to speak again. Damn.*

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence," Jake said casually. "I will do my job, which is to stay alive and make sure no one else can claim Earth. For actual leadership, you will have to look to my Ministers. Speaking of which..."

Seeing no reason to delay, Jake turned around and instantly offered for Miranda to become Minister. She accepted instantly, and Jake repeated this with the King, Sword Saint, and Arthur. Arthur was the only one who hesitated for a moment but still agreed.

"There we go, four out of five Ministers appointed," Jake said with a nod.

He knew that everyone already knew that the last member of this council would be a beast, as much of the discussion before the vote revolved around people arguing about who to add. Most of those opposed to a beast joining the council naturally want someone from their own clique or at least another human.

Valhal also had the decency to shut the fuck up during all this time, and naturally, Caleb and the Court had no interest in any kind of official position. All he did was give Jake a cheeky smile after he became World Leader as he mimed being so proud he had to wipe away a tear. Asshole.

They still had a few more topics to talk about, one of those related to Valhal and for Jake to publicly call them out. Miranda had mentioned that he had to outwardly take a

hard stance and make it clear he disapproved of what they did. All of it had something to do with the plans of the Viper, so Jake just rolled with it.

However, before he had a chance to... the second vote began unprompted.

The second vote of the World Congress relates to Earth's final trial.

The enlightened species have had time to establish themselves on the planet and form alliances and connections, but will it be enough to truly lay claim to the planet as a whole? There live more than the enlightened in the multiverse, and soon Earth will have to prove it can hold up.

Chains hold back that which seeks to claim the planet as its own, but with the links broken one by one, it soon shall be released.

The Prima Guardian awaits its freedom.

To truly lay claim to planet Earth, the Planetary Pylon must be claimed, a core that is currently protected by a barrier that requires two keys to open. One key shall be given to the elected World Leader, while the second key is held by the Prima Guardian.

However, before the Prima Guardian comes, a choice must be made.

Face your trail alone, or seek out allies.

In five years, the Guardian will arrive on Earth with its army and must be defeated within five years of arrival, or the Guardian will move to claim the world for itself as the barrier naturally falls. All planets can choose to either engage the Prima Guardian alone or ally with others to create an army capable of defeating each planet's Prima Guardian.

Note that the strength of each Prima Guardian is based on the number of fragments collected from slain Primas as their Records and power have been absorbed by the Prima Guardian, as well as the overall performance of the planet in all prior system events. Rewards for slaying the Prima Guardian will be split amongst all contributing planets. Bonus reward for any planet defeating the Prima Guardian on their own. But be warned, for should the respective World Leader of any planet die, the Prima will claim the key and thus the planet.

The Prima Guardian Alliance Interface will open up for all World Leaders whose planet voted to ally with others. Should a planet choose to face its Prima Guardian alone, this interface will only appear after the World Leader's own Prima Guardian has been defeated.

What Path will Earth walk? One where they face the Guardian by themselves or with the help of the rest of the Milkyway?

Votes remaining: 25/25

Time remaining: 7:36:55

It was quite a chunky description that could get summed up rather easily: big boss coming to Earth in five years, choose now, face big boss alone or ask for help like a bunch of losers. Sure, it also said that all of this was to finally claim the planet properly, but Jake cared more about the prospect of facing this Prima Guardian. He was also quite surprised by the mention of this Prima thing again.

Seems like all of that stuff about the Exalted Prima is indeed a major theme of this universe, huh? Jake thought. He had heard from the Viper it had happened before with other universes where major events during these initiation events centered around some topic, location, or entity. However, with all initiations and all the system events that followed differing so significantly, no one could truly predict what would happen, making it all a bit more exciting. At least to Jake.

Chatter appeared around the room, bringing Jake out of his wayward thoughts and back to the World Congress chamber. Though he was unsure why people were even discussing it. He quickly placed his votes before speaking up.

"What is there to talk about?" Jake spoke loudly. "More accurately, why are all of you talking about it like it matters to you? We all know the answer already, right?"

Jake turned to the booths around him.

"If Earth truly requires aid to defeat this Prima Guardian, then no other planet in the Milkyway will be able to do anything," Caleb spoke up first. Omitting that there was one who did have people who could help, but no one considered that orange fuck a possibility.

"Help seems wholly unnecessary," the Sword Saint also spoke up.

"It is indeed a waste of time to even consider it," the King agreed.

"There you have it," Jake said. "So finish this damn vote already. No fucking way we are going to share our prey and bounty with other planets."

In all fairness, Jake would prefer not to share it with the others on Earth either, but sometimes one had to be nice. Also... he saw an opportunity and leaped on it.

"Besides, the last time we invited aliens from another planet, it didn't end well. Oh yeah, which begs the question, will we be able to rely on Valhal in this matter, or do we need

to sign some shitty contract first before you are willing to defend Earth?" Jake said in a venomous tone as he looked toward Sven.

Sven, to his credit, looked like he had expected this and did not try to make any excuses. "We of Valhal can only lay ourselves down flat in surrender and realize we misjudged the entire situation and made many mistakes. I thank the Chosen for showing mercy during this time so that we, with time, can make it up to you to hopefully establish a healthy and mutually beneficial working relationship, allowing us to prove ourselves to both the Chosen and Earth," Sven said as he bowed deeply.

Jake had kind of expected this, but his response did make Jake suspect that Sven did not know that some shady stuff was going on that the Viper was in on. He acted more as a CEO of a company where the board of directors did something moronic, and he now had to take responsibility. Jake would feel sorry for him if not for the fact that he was still the damn CEO, and like any CEO asked to do some dumb shit, he had the option of refusing and potentially quitting. Being a heretic wasn't that bad anyway.

"We at Valhal realize that the new World Leader and his Council will need many resources to stabilize their rule, and to help this cause, Valhal is more than happy to offer gifts to expedite everything," Sven continued after a brief pause.

Did they need a lot of resources and stuff? Well, probably not, but fuck if Jake knew. What he did know was that he liked free stuff.

Staring at Sven, Jake still continued acting harshly. "You are lucky I consider the Runemaiden a close friend, or Valhal would have either gone the way of the Holy Church or the way of the alien invader's comrades. You are on a tight leash, so don't fuck it up. No third chances."

Sven bowed once more. "That is all we could ever ask for. Thank you, Chosen of the Malefic One."

Jake exchanged a glance with the man, feeling a sense of gratitude from him. Confronting Valhal publicly not only proved that Jake was still mad at them to everyone – including any potential spies or individuals who had a relationship with Ell'Hakan – but also allowed Valhal to apologize and get a way into the good graces of all the other factions. Many of them would have hesitated to interact with Valhal if they thought the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his council remained pissed at them.

"Approach the council after this and discuss terms. For now, let's just get this vote over with. What are you people waiting for? We are facing it alone, so place those damn votes already," Jake said, sweeping his gaze across the room.

Also, he really had to hold himself back from admonishing a lot of them some more, especially those from the United Cities Alliance. This second vote made it clear Earth had more dangers to face, and he could already imagine the result if they had gotten

their will. Jake, the King, the Sword Saint, Sylphie... so many powerful and promising individuals would have been tossed off the planet. Shit, they did manage to make Casper leave, someone Jake would very much have liked to have around.

At least those morons seemed to listen to him now as they finally got their shit together, and all the votes were placed.

The election concerning the final trial of Earth has now concluded!

Earth has chosen the face the final trial alone. Your Path is set, and the Prima Guardian will descend upon the planet in five (5 years). With it shall come an army and all of the formerly undefeated Primas that have gained more power through the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

Warning: Based on collected fragments and Earth's performance in all prior system events, the difficulty rating of the Prima Guardian is considered extremely high. New novel chapters are published on *novel*✂fire✂*net*

Prepare yourselves, or the Prima Guardian shall find no equal and lay claim to your world.

Jake read the message and the part about the difficulty rating. Others around him began chattering loudly again, some mentioning how they made a mistake, others trying to calm them down, with a third group even asking if perhaps there was a way off Earth if things went south. Jake cared for none of it as he could only smile to himself.

To him, it wasn't a warning.

It was the promise of a good time.

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

Chapter 572: A World That Makes Sense

He had hoped it would end... but no. The World Congress was a cruel mistress and allowed them to stay within the system event for the remainder of the allotted time. Jake wanted to leave, but a sharp look from Miranda made him know that he better stay. Alas, it was probably for the best, as seeing the newly-elected World Leader run away prematurely probably didn't inspire confidence.

However, even if he was forced to stay physically, no one had told him to not go on a mental journey to somewhere better. Even if he did try to stay engaged and at least feign interest. Hey, he had tried, okay?

Jake would firmly classify the rest of the World Congress as a waste of time. Miranda would probably disagree and call it a "valuable opportunity to calm the doubters and display unity to the many City Lords of Earth, thus inspiring confidence in the council."

In fact, those had been the exact words she had used.

Anyway, Jake had nearly eight hours to listen to mundane chatter, and by the time the subject of tax codes was brought up, Jake completely zoned out and went into his Soulspace to talk to a way better conversation partner: himself.

Within his Soulspace, sim-Jake and the cursed chimera both sat calmly as sim-Jake had a hand on the huge monster. It did not react but let him stay there, and Jake knew what he was doing. Some kind of attunement. The details were still a bit fuzzy, but Jake knew that the curse energy and Eternal Hunger were instrumental to the mythical rarity skill he and sim-Jake hoped to make.

After waiting a while, sim-Jake was done, and the moment he released his hand, the huge beast of pure curse energy attacked, forcing sim-Jake to seal it again. Once that was done, his other self turned around and regarded the real Jake.

"This entire deal with World Leader is a waste of time. Why bother? Just evacuate everyone to the Order of the Malefic Viper and leave this stupid rock behind," sim-Jake said, commenting on recent events. "All you are doing is creating distractions for us."

"Maybe, maybe not," Jake shrugged. "In either case, I don't plan on making it into a distraction but an opportunity. We don't know what benefits being World Leader may offer in the future, but I am willing to risk it leading to nothing for the chance to gain something unique."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then I will have wasted a bit of time. How much lifespan do we have by now? Do you even know? I reckon at least a thousand years or something, and probably ten times that at C-grade. So what is a few years chasing a bad lead?" Jake argued.

"Ultimately, the choice is yours," sim-Jake shrugged. "You are the one who will have to deal with all of the annoyances. I just don't want you to dilly-dally and end up stuck at S-grade because you decided to fuck around and not focus on what truly matters."

"If I get stuck at S-grade, I will just have to hunt a few gods or something," Jake grinned, unafraid. "Or die trying. Both are acceptable."

Sim-Jake just shook his head. "Anyway, we will need a lot of time to prepare, and especially with this Prima Guardian arriving... do we have time? Can you figure something out with the Viper?"

Jake nodded. "Should definitely be able to. Once we go to the Order, we can look into it. But you are certain that this Path you have chosen to walk down will work?"

His other self just smiled. "I am betting my entire existence on it."

Everything was wrong... at least it had been. Suddenly everything looked so clear; the muddiness of reality washed away as the many strings that held him down were forcefully severed by the system itself.

William felt so weird he had a hard time describing it. He had joined the World Congress as he had practically been ordered to, not sure what he could even get out of it. He had spent the last month just wandering around, unsure of where to go and what to do. Ms. Kim had told him that maybe being lost and working on finding himself for a while wasn't the worst, but William hated feeling so... wrong.

Quite a few times, he regretted wanting more emotions that much, but in the end, he knew it was for the best. It just sucked to feel like he was walking through a swamp and like the endless threads of karma around him were a net made to slow him down and incapacitate him.

That is until he joined the World Congress. In an instant, the threads disappeared. The net was gone, clarity washed through his mind, and he even felt like his body underwent a cleansing. That is when he realized why the Chosen of the Malefic Viper wanted him to enter the World Congress.

In the Congress, nothing could influence him... and all ongoing influence was dispelled. While William could not be sure, he had a fear that Eversmile had placed several karmic magics on him that denouncing the Blessing did nothing to address.

Yet, even with his mind clear, it only became more evident how truly lost he was. William was still afraid of the Chosen, yes, but it wasn't the same kind of fear... in fact, standing there in the World Congress, he had no particularly negative feelings. It made William wonder if the intense fear had ever been his own or just the result of Eversmile doing something.

William had slept once during this month as a test, and for the first time since the Tutorial, he didn't have a nightmare. That at least somewhat confirmed that the cause of his nightmares – all of which just amplified his fear of the Chosen – were not natural in any way.

Hearing the speech of the Chosen also made William realize one thing. The Chosen truly didn't care about a lot of things, and he probably didn't care about William at all

either, unless he made direct trouble for him. It was comforting but also disturbing as William realized that the strongest emotion he could detect towards himself using his karmic magic wasn't anger or killing intent. It was apathy. An emotion he realized the Chosen also had before their last encounter...

William simply wasn't a noteworthy character in the eyes of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. At most, he was a curiosity to the man. Their disparity in power was large, and seeing the other people around him, like the Sword Saint and the King, only made it all the more evident how insignificant William truly was.

It made it clear that William, indeed, wasn't a protagonist of the world as he had gone around thinking for so long. The Chosen was one. The Sword Saint. The Fallen King. But William? William was just a karmic mage who could hopefully one day be helpful to all the people he screwed over. He realized this and could only smile to himself.

William felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders as he was finally free of the endless net of toxic karma and pressure. He wasn't really anyone special... and he didn't need to be. He just had to be who he wanted to be and do what he himself wanted to do. Find out what he actually wanted out of life.

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 (1/1)

Race Evolution Requirements Met

WARNING: Evolution unavailable during ongoing system event.

William saw the system message as the quest completed, and he could only sigh at how stupidly simple some things could be.

--

His escape was glorious as Jake was teleported back to Earth after seven damn hours of super engaging political discussions that sometimes disturbed Jake and Sim-Jake's far more interesting conversation. Sadly, he went straight from the pan and into the fire as he had another damn meeting at the main office of Haven just after the World Congress. The Sword Saint, King, and Miranda had been teleported back to where they had entered from, so at least they were all gathered again right away.

More politics. More talking. Luckily, Jake quickly managed to find an excuse to sneak off, but just before he did so, the old man at the table asked for a bit of his time.

The Sword Saint led Jake into another room and erected an isolation barrier around them. Jake wondered what it was about but soon learned as the old man spoke.

"I have considered matters more related to this entire situation with Ell'Hakan. From what I gathered, I believe others here have a misunderstanding. Jake, when you fought him, how powerful did you think he was? How would you evaluate him?" the Sword Saint asked Jake.

Jake considered for a moment. "Elusive, fast, resilient, but overall not a major threat in direct combat. He mainly used his goons against me and took more of a supportive role as a caster. Don't get me wrong, he is strong for his level, but he is a pompous dick using tricks over power."

The old man nodded. "Did you think he faced you seriously at the time?"

After thinking for a few seconds, Jake shook his head. "No, definitely not. His plan was always to throw me to the other side of the planet, and he was just buying time."

"Interestingly enough, I got the same feeling when he fought me," the Sword Saint said. "At least in the beginning. However, as time passed, he did have a genuine desire to kill me. We fought for longer and more seriously than you did. Is that assertion correct?"

Jake nodded. "True. What are you trying to say?"

"While it is a cliché, I do believe one can learn a lot about someone from fighting them. My understanding of this Ell'Hakan from all the explanations before I encountered him was that we were dealing with a politician born with a golden spoon. Yet when I fought him, I met something entirely different. I met a seasoned fighter who has wielded his weapon for decades. A warrior born through slaughter. He also enjoyed our fight far too much, even refraining from using his Bloodline for nearly the entire fight."

"So he is stronger than I initially thought? Does it ultimately matter?" Jake asked.

"No, perhaps it does not. But I do feel like I need to warn you. Do not underestimate Ell'Hakan in battle, even if you manage to isolate and fight him alone. While our battle did appear to end with my victory, I had far from won. He still had far more to show me, and he was far too calm. I truly believe now that without inviting springtime fully, I would have died if we had kept fighting. So do not mistake his schemes as a sign of weakness, as I fear that when he is backed into a corner without any schemes, is when he gets the most dangerous," the Sword Saint finished saying his peace. "Less annoying, perhaps, but more deadly."

If it was anyone else saying all this, Jake could have probably brushed them off or maybe even considered that Ell'Hakan had messed with their heads. However, this was the Sword Saint, probably the human Jake respected the most as an equal. If he thought Ell'Hakan was more than met the eye, he could only take it to heart.

"Got it," Jake said with a serious nod. He still firmly believed he was stronger than Ell'Hakan bar any tricks or schemes, and he would keep thinking that until the orange fucker proved him wrong or was dead. But... there was a chance the gap was not as large as Jake believed.

"That is all I wanted to add. Now continue your journey. I shall remain here a bit before I, too, head out and finish the final steps before my evolution," the Sword Saint said.

"Good luck with it all," Jake smiled as he headed off back toward the lodge. Carmen joined him shortly as she walked beside him on the way back, looking deep in thought. When they made it back, she finally spoke.

"Do you think I made a mistake by joining Valhal?" she asked, a bit unsure. "Fuck, even asking that is being a heretic, isn't it?"

Jake looked at her and shrugged. "If they consider that heretical, then fuck 'em. Besides, I doubt they do. And I would not say you made a mistake; quite the opposite. They fit you. Just ignore all of the political shit like I do. I don't blame you for what Valhal chooses to do as long as you don't blame me for whatever nefarious shit the Order of the Malefic Viper is up to."

Carmen smirked. "A bit unfair considering you are the Chosen, but sure. Does feel weird to dedicate kills to them and do stuff in their honor, though." Fresh chapters posted on ***novel•fire•net***

"Just think about doing it for Valdemar. Valdemar is a cool dude, as far as I can tell. Or just dedicate kills to the concept of Valhal. There are plenty of ways to make the Path you walk make sense to you. Worst case, just become a heretic who doesn't actually believe in anything Valhal does but still want their skills and Records," Jake shrugged. "I am really not the one to ask advice from for things like this; you do know that, right?"

"Or maybe you are," Carmen sighed. "Either way, I want to do some soul-searching, I guess. By soul-searching, I mean wander into the forest and kill shit alone until the world makes more sense to me, or I have at least punched all my frustrations out."

"Totally fair," Jake said. "Killing things is a great way to clear your mind. Very zen."

Carmen shook her head and punched him on the shoulder. "Say goodbye to Sylphie for me. I don't really wanna delay but just head out right away. Before that cute little ball of feathers makes me want to stay."

"Have fun," Jake waved to her as she had already begun heading off. Within a few seconds, she was out of the valley and headed toward the forest. *Wait, what if she kills all the good prey? Well... I guess I can share a bit.*

Jake used his bond to search for Sylphie and realized she was somewhere far up in the sky. Really far up. Not quite at the layer of C-grades, but close. If he had to guess, he would say the small hawk was showing off to her parents.

Referring to his checklist of things to do before C-grade, Jake now only had four things left to do before evolving. Besides getting those last few class levels, of course. Though he could do that pretty quickly after he was done with all the other things he wanted to do.

1. Upgrade Sagacity of the Malefic Viper
2. Go to Order and defeat baby Snappy
3. Mythical skill creation with the help of sim-Jake
4. Actually evolve.

Jake had checked off two things, and he planned to do all his remaining goals – besides the evolution itself – at the Order. But before going, he had to do one more thing he did not add to his list. Becoming World Leader had not really given him much value, but there had been one useful benefit.

The ability to allow C-grades to visit human areas.

Seeing Sylphie was gone, Jake headed straight for the Mangrove River, this time not to visit them but to allow Scarlett to visit him. Then afterward, he could head up and say hi to Sandy and also allow his worm friend to go wherever they wanted. Finally, he would see if he could have a certain whale visit.

Because what could possibly go wrong by bringing a group of powerful C-grades into an occupied human city?

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

Chapter 573: Snake In The City

To call Scarlett absolutely ecstatic that Jake visited so fast again was an understatement. It only got more extreme when Jake asked her to help out with his experiment of allowing her to follow him to otherwise restricted areas.

"So, I will admit, I am not entirely certain how this works," Jake said. He did not have a skill or anything to "mark" people. Well, he did have one to mark people, but that was something else entirely. The World Leader ability was weird, and Jake tried to do the most basic stuff.

He concentrated and willed for Scarlett to be allowed to go anywhere. Nothing seemed to happen, and Jake feared that he couldn't actually use this ability without a profession allowing it or a lot of practice. Yet after a few seconds, Scarlett spoke up.

"I... I think it worked?" she said, a bit unsure and nervous.

"And you are not just saying that because I want it to work and for me to feel better?" Jake asked skeptically.

"I would never do... I... no... I do feel a bit different. It is weird, and I can't quite explain it, but I feel more... free? Unburdened?" Scarlett said, still as nervous as before.

"Have you tried using a teleporter before?" Jake then asked her.

"I have," she nodded. "But only ones within the Mangrove when Old Grumpy was experimenting. I cannot use the teleporters the humans set up to travel outside of my domain."

"Out of curiosity, what stops you? You being C-grade or the system restrictions?"

"I do not know; it just simply doesn't allow me to travel through," Scarlett shook her head. A moment passed before her eyes lit up. "Oh! You mean to say that maybe it would work now?"

"That is the hope," Jake smirked. "Willing to give it a shot? If not, and you are hit with some kind of backlash, you should be able to instantly teleport back again. Though it is a bit risky, and we could maybe just go to the outskirts of the Mangrove." This update is available on [novelfire.net](#)

"I trust the Chosen," Scarlett smiled. "And I am certain the system would not allow me to teleport if it would simply result in my demise."

Jake was still a bit apprehensive, but Scarlett had clearly made up her mind. Seeing her determination, he could only agree, and they walked to the teleporter together. With several C-grade snakes watching curiously, the two of them went into the teleportation chamber.

He saw how nervous she was, making him reach out and hold her hand – with gloves on, of course - as he smiled comfortingly at her. "Are you ready?"

Her otherwise ghostly white face flushed red as she did a small nod. They activated the teleporter, and Jake still held onto the hand as they appeared at the Fort. An entire snake girl was attached to the hand too, and she looked perplexed for a moment before looking around her.

Jake, still holding her hand, led her outside as they appeared not far from the giant metal dome, with a great outlook over the city that had sprung up at the Fort. And, honestly, it really was a city at this point. Jake had no idea how many people lived there – despite owning the land – but he knew it had to be a lot. It was turning into a real metropolis.

Scarlett seemed to barely register that he still held her hand as her head whipped from side to side and her reptilian eyes darted around to take in everything. Jake smiled and felt happy for her.

Turning his head, he also looked towards a certain spot in mid-air and gave a nod. An invisible drone that had been floating there stopped observing them and moved on, and Jake also felt the attention of dozens of other similar attentions leaving him. Arnold sure had some protection set up in the Fort from the looks of it.

"What do you say?" Jake asked.

"It is... large. So many humans in one place, yet all of them are so weak. The weak are protected by the strong. Hunting others is disallowed, too, right? Doesn't that mean most who live here are creators and not fighters?" she asked curiously.

"It is mostly creators, but remember they are not to be underestimated. Within that metal dome is one of the most dangerous humans on Earth, and he is a pure creator," Jake explained as he pointed out Arnold's mad scientist lair.

"A strong construction, the metal looks nearly as resilient as my scales," she said, impressed. Not realizing that it said more about her damn scales than a giant dome of metal. The worst part was that Jake also estimated it to be the truth, if not an understatement to praise Arnold.

"Just don't begin to go around destroying stuff to test that out," Jake joked.

"I would never!" Scarlett said with much indignation as she shook her head and tried to raise her hands, but her movement made her aware she was still holding onto Jake's hand, making her quiet down and look at the ground.

Jake just shook his head and softly let go of her hand. "Let's head back to Haven, okay?"

She stared at this hand with disappointment for a moment before nodding. "If that is what the Chosen wants."

Will really have to work on that attitude before we get to the Order, Jake thought but didn't say much as he headed out of the Fort with Scarlett. The two of them flew, and Jake had to admit that even with him using wings and Scarlett just flying with regular energy manipulation, she was still far faster than him. He didn't doubt that she could destroy pretty much any human settlement on Earth if she so desired.

Once they made their way back to Haven, Jake led Scarlett toward the lodge. Miranda and the others were still stuck in the office discussing stuff, so he would have to leave her alone for a bit with his banana tree-that-wasn't-a-tree.

"Can you wait here for a while?" Jake asked her once they made it to the lodge.

Scarlett looked disappointed again but still looked curiously around, prompting Jake to explain a bit about where they were.

"This is my lodge and pretty much my home on Earth. It's where I first started to live after I returned from the Tutorial, and it has a lot of sentimental value," Jake explained.

Scarlett's eyes opened wide as she seemed to look at the lodge with far different eyes. She closely studied everything but soon noted something. "Someone dared break the Chosen's table!?"

Jake cringed a bit and scratched his head. "An... accident happened. Anyway, see you in a bit!"

With a jump, Jake headed toward the sky to gather even more beast friends. Sylphie and family were all up there, and while Sandy was probably nowhere close, he had a strong feeling they could get to him pretty damn fast. To make sure his sandworm friend wasn't too slow, he took out the weird egg-that-wasn't-an-egg and infused some energy into it during his ascent. Once he felt like Sandy had noticed, he stopped and stored the egg away again.

Finally, he contacted a certain someone to set up a meeting. Jake reached out mentally as the divine connection descended.

"Well, well, well, I guess a congratulation is in order, revered World Leader of Earth," Villy joked first thing. *"I can't even begin to tell you how proud I am from seeing you move up in the world and become a proper politician."*

"Fuck off," Jake joked back. *"I guess I should also say I am proud of you for holding back your curiosity and not contacting me right after my most recent vision into your controversial past."*

"No need to give me credit; I just had more important things to do. I was actually doing alchemy, you know? Duskleaf is over the moon," Villy said, clearly grinning on the other side.

"Funny, because in this vision, you were also doing alchemy and being rather shit at it. Couldn't even make a health potion," Jake mocked the poor Primordial.

"Hey, my failures pathed the way to greatness," Villy took it in strides as they finally got down to business. "So, another one of these World Congresses is over with. Anything worth sharing?"

"Well, we got this upcoming final trial thing..."

Jake began to explain the second vote in detail, pretty much just reading what the system messages said. The Prima Guardian would appear in five years, but as they both interpreted it, then they only really had to fight the Prima within ten. Five or ten years wasn't a lot of time, but it also wasn't a little. He did wonder about one thing, though...

"Do you think this Prima Guardian will be B-grade?" Jake asked curiously.

"If it is, your entire planet is doomed, and you may as well bail on it now," Villy mocked him back. "Even with Nevermore, reaching B-grade or a level where you can hunt B-grades within five or even ten years is utterly unfeasible. The time you can spend in Nevermore is still limited, and even if you did choose to just rush levels, you would be hit hard by diminishing returns. If you did somehow manage to make it to a level of power where you could fight B-grades in time, it would be with a shitty foundation and sorely lacking Records for a C-grade. So, no, at most, this Prima Guardian will be in the later stages of C-grade. I have never heard of any B-grade in any of these initiation events appearing within a decade."

Jake took it all in and nodded in understanding, but he did bite onto one thing: *"Are the diminishing returns really that bad? Isn't it only really a thing if you hunt a lot of the same kind of enemy or if the fights get too easy? I haven't noticed it otherwise, I don't think."*

"It is bad, yes. So far, you have not really had many issues with it, sure, but that doesn't mean it won't be in the future. For the Tutorial, it is by design not a problem, and after returning to Earth, you have had a natural and balanced approach. If you had decided to go dungeon hunting in rapid succession after you cleared that one below your city, or maybe went in to explore the forest right away, you would have gained some more levels, yes, but soon you would find the levels just stopped coming all-together or it would get to the point where you could kill a thousand beasts higher level than you and still not level up. It happens to many who try to rush their levels and not focus on other things. In fact, it happens to everyone to some degree as it kicks in after a singular kill granting experience. You can alleviate this issue with qualitative upgrades along the

way, like skill upgrades, but it can only do so much. The best thing to do is simply wait and focus on other pursuits. Even beasts have to do this, hence why they rarely hunt but instead consume natural treasures to slowly progress or work on improving other qualitative aspects of themselves. Ah, but I would note that there are windows of sorts. At the start of any grade is one such window where you can do a shitload of hunting without running into any noteworthy issues," Villy explained as the great god of exposition he was.

"Huh. I assume that last part is why a lot of the Nevermore stuff is at early C-grade only?" Jake asked.

"Exactly," Villy confirmed. "It is a great chance to get some solid levels under your belt for all of you Earthlings. Shit, it may even be expected by the system that you will go to Nevermore and gain levels to face this Prima Guardian thing."

"Aight. Two more things," Jake added. "First, do you think this event is part of Ell'Hakan and Yip's plan?"

"When?" Villy asked a bit teasingly.

"When what?"

"When do you ask if it became a part of their plan? If you mean before the World Congress, then no. No one knew what event would take place. If you ask about right now, then yes, it will certainly be factored into their schemings. That is the hallmark of any good plan: adaptability. You do not expect everything to go flawlessly, but adapt and reconfigure the plan to still reach an acceptable outcome," Villy explained. "Now, what was your second question?"

"Eh, could you help contact that Karroch god for me so I can find the whale he blessed? I want to talk to it about potentially being in the council," Jake asked.

"You want me to reach out to some weak unaffiliated god and ask him for a favor? To be the one who approaches him first, laying down my pride?" Villy asked in disdain.

"Or send someone else?" Jake scratched his head. "Or a letter?"

"A possibility," Villy said teasingly. "But I must actually hand it to this Karroch. Out of all the gods not close to me, he is probably the one who knows most about our relationship just from the fact that he was in charge of your Tutorial. His plan of trying to help you to get in my good graces is quite well thought out."

"Is it working?" Jake teased back.

"A little. I tend to not be a fan of beastmasters, if I am perfectly honest. He was very unpopular before due to having made quite a few enemies, especially the Brimstone

Hegemon, who I happened to kill. He should be able to find other Pantheons who want him, but I guess I can reach out with an olive branch for my dear Chosen and offer him a job. From what I saw, he at least seemed like one of the less shitty beastmasters around,” he graciously said.

”Thank you, oh my ever-benevolent Patron,” Jake answered with much reverence.

”Yeah, fuck you, and see you at the Order soon!” Villy finished as the connection was cut promptly.

Jake just smirked as he kept flying until he finally reached far enough up for C-grades to live.

He could get Sylphie and family on the way down once he had gathered Sandy, as he had a strong feeling making them wait for him wasn’t gonna work out well. Sylphie was not known to be the most patient of birds.

However, it appeared the choice was not his to make as he felt the green bird approach from afar, likely dragging her parents along based on her slower speed. Jake had stopped just at the C-grade cloud layer and sat himself down on a platform of mana in mid-air as he stared out into the clouds. He saw movement in the distance but didn’t bother with beasts unless they decided to mess with him first.

Minutes passed as Sylphie grew closer. She had been quite a bit away and wasn’t in a rush, seemingly even taking breaks – or having fights – along the way. He also got the feeling that Sandy was fast on their way, quite a lot faster than the hawks could possibly travel.

Smiling a bit to himself, Jake decided to meditate a bit as he waited for the beasts to arrive. Hopefully, they would get along.

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Chapter 574: A Friend of A Friend Is A Rival

They did not get along.

Well, more accurately, Sylphie seemed to not get along with Sandy in the slightest. She zoomed around the giant worm, making angry noises as her blades of wind tried to harm the giant worm while Sandy, in turn, just laughed.

“He he, the little bird tickles!”

Jake just shook his head and smiled. Sylphie probably could do some real damage if she wanted, but she at least had enough awareness to hold back. Then again, Sandy could also just leave in a heartbeat if Sylphie got a bit too much.

Hawkie and Mystie just stared at the giant worm that wriggled in the air from the constant assault of the peak D-grade hawk. An assault that would tear most D-grades to shreds in seconds, even if it was just Sylphie playing.

“Hi hi,” Sandy still laughed as they asked. *“So... so you said I can now go anywhere? I did feel something when you focused real hard before.”*

“That is how things should be,” Jake answered. *“Give it a go?”*

“Sure!”

In the next moment, Sandy disappeared, leaving an even angrier Sylphie behind to miss her blows. Jake frowned as he felt the ripples of space from where the giant worm had just been. A moment later, Sandy popped their head out of the clouds below. *“It works!”*

Jake opened his mouth to speak but ended up just shaking his head again. *“Let’s visit Haven then. There is someone else I want you both to meet.”*

He spoke telepathically out loud so both the hawks and Sandy could hear it, even if he knew Sandy could also hear him if he spoke normally. Sylphie, hearing this, looked at Sandy with a challenging gaze before flying towards Jake with great speed, right into his arms. Jake reacted on instinct and caught her as she nuzzled up to his chest and got herself comfortable, still throwing looks at Sandy.

“I think your bird is jealous,” Sandy joked with him. *“Ah, but I get it! Wind magic is kind of just worse space magic, isn’t it? Must feel inferior. Poor thing.”*

Sylphie took great offense to this as she screeched. *“Ree! Ree!”*

“Oh, you got super wind? Well, I got super cosmic space! No! Genesis cosmic space!”

Sylphie momentarily looked taken aback but soon retaliated. *“Ree!”*

This time Sandy seemed to have taken a hit as Sylphie brilliantly argued that space was just boring wind, and as her wind was kind of green, it was superior to space magic in all ways as space didn’t have a color. An argument Jake had no idea even made sense. Especially as Sandy then began to argue that colors actually made things worse...

Which just made even less sense as Sandy had no eyes and couldn’t see colors.

I may have made a mistake, Jake realized as he led the two arguing beasts down toward his lodge. He did notice one issue there, though. Sandy was a bit... big. Could probably find a place to lay in the valley, but it would be problematic to bring them around anywhere.

Jake voiced his concern, which Sylphie just took as ammunition to argue she was superior. However, this time around, she had to admit defeat.

"Oh yeah! Well, space magic is so cool it can do stuff like this!"

In an instant, Sandy's body began to shrink. Jake felt the intense movements of space mana doing the work, and Jake knew that Sandy technically wasn't getting smaller; they just compressed the space around themselves and created a pocket of sorts. Jake knew that a good wave of destructive mana would destroy this technique, and it probably also took quite the upkeep, but he nevertheless gave Sandy a thumbs up.

Sylphie tried to show off as she tried to puff herself up by breathing in as much as she could, trying to make herself look bigger to prove she could also grow in size, ultimately just making her look silly. Sandy laughed in triumph as a worm, now about the size of a large horse, flew down next to him. Quite a bit slower than before, mind you. This only hammered home that the impromptu shrinking technique had little to no practical application outside of fitting into spaces Sandy couldn't before.

Soon the valley entered their sight, and Jake frowned as he didn't see Scarlett anywhere. Upon landing, he also didn't see her anywhere within the house. Jake wondered if she had gone to explore the laboratory below the lodge. Rather than wondering, Jake closed his eyes and activated tracking as well as just his usual sensing abilities.

She went down to the biodome?

He wondered what had attracted her there as Jake motioned for the group of birds and worm to follow. On the way, Sylphie managed to zoom over and swipe a newly-formed banana, making Jake shake his head at the audacity of these fruit thieves.

They quickly went down and into the cave, which Sandy commented felt very nice and familiar. Once a sandworm, always a sandworm, it seemed. Jake felt Scarlett ahead, and upon entering the biodome, he saw her walking behind a large troll that motioned to different plants with three smaller trolls following behind.

"What you doing?" Jake asked once he got closer.

Scarlett turned around and bowed, with Rick also turning and doing a big wave.

"I was simply receiving teachings from Sir Rick," Scarlett said. "He attends the garden of the Chosen, does he not?"

“That he does, and he is doing a damn good job, too,” Jake said with a smile and gave Rick a big thumbs-up. Rick mimicked Jake and did a thumbs-up back with an even bigger smile.

Jake wasn't lying, either. He really liked the biodome. Did he actually use the garden down there? No, not really. In fact, he had kind of forgotten about it and all of his plans for it, including the artificial sun he wanted to install and all that jazz.

At least Jake now realized that maybe that sun would have been a bad idea, as Rick seemed to do best with underground plants anyway. However, even if Jake didn't use the underground garden much, it didn't make it useless. He could always use what grew there to sell or maybe to help train new alchemists or something. Or, well, to just have Rick have a nice play to live and enjoy life.

“Ree!” Sylphie finally made herself known. Not that Scarlett hadn't noticed the entourage, which consisted of three hawks and a large floating worm. Sylphie seemed to have found yet another rival as she stared up at Scarlett, who stared back.

For a moment, Jake got the feeling that Scarlett was jealous of Sylphie? He looked down at the hawk cradled in his arms, not sure why she would.

“Greetings, hawk of wind,” Scarlett said, also looking at Hawkie, Mystie, and Sandy. “Hawk of lighting, of mysticism, and worm of... space?”

“Eh, acceptable assessment,” Sandy answered. “Nice to meet you too, white snake!”

Hawkie and Mystie both regarded Scarlett with apprehension as they felt her power. As a mid-tier C-grade, she was by far the strongest among them, and they all knew it. If she was an enemy, they would all be in deep shit, with even Sandy having difficulties. If anyone could get away, it would be the worm, though.

“Anyway, I guess I should introduce you all...”

Jake did the polite thing and had all his beast friends get to know each other. Rick also joined in, very interested in having guests. He even brought over some interesting-looking fruits Jake did not recognize but that tasted extremely good.

On a side note, then no one mentioned that Sandy also happened to be the Chosen of Snappy, or the Boundless Hydra, as fancy people called him. Not doing so was probably a good idea as Jake was entirely uncertain how Scarlett would react, and it would also ruin one of the best things Jake had seen in a while...

A worm, a snake, and a hawk arguing which race was best. Scarlett argued snakes were just better worms, Sandy vehemently disagreed and came up with weird arguments for worms being the best, and Sylphie kept screeching how hawks were the “bestest.”

Hawkie and Mystie even backed up their daughter with information on how birds, hawks included, actually hunted both worms and snakes before the system. Scarlett, however, also had memories of before the system and talked about how snakes ate the eggs of stupid birds who just left them lying around... With Sandy then saying that worms didn't care as worms just ate anything, thus proving they were the best beasts in existence.

Now, it was only after Jake gathered all these beasts together he finally got around to asking a quite pertinent question: Why?

Why had he gathered them all in Haven? Scarlett was to bring her to the Order, but did he need to call for Sandy and allow the worm to travel into human territory? Well, no, he didn't have to. Sandy probably wouldn't even like being in human territory due to the lack of tasty things to eat.

So, why? The simple answer was just that Jake had wanted to. He wanted to, at the very least, give the beasts the freedom to go wherever they wanted. It was funny how his mind had instantly made granting them more freedom of movement a priority despite the lack of practical merit.

Also... he had to admit seeing them all like this was amusing. Sylphie had long left his arms to fly around and argue louder while chasing Sandy. Scarlett, in turn, tried really hard to look dignified while three kid trolls poked her and wanted to touch her snakeskin dress.

Eventually, they did get tired of their squabbles, and Jake could finally get to the important part after they at least chimed down a little.

"Scarlett and I will be headed to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and while we are going, I would at least like to offer you all the opportunity to go with," Jake said to the group.

"Meh, I'm good here, still stuff to eat," Sandy instantly shut it down. *"And the many-headed guy says that staying on Earth is also all good, so I stay."*

Rick shook his head, understanding the sentiment but seemingly happy where he was. Hawkie and Mystie also declined, something Jake had expected.

"Ree!" Sylphie also explained, expertly outlining why she wouldn't go.

"Guess it will just be us going then, Scarlett," Jake smiled at the snake girl.

"Yes!" She nodded happily. "I once more thank the Chosen for giving me this-"

"But before that, we must work on that," Jake interrupted her.

"Work on what?" Scarlett asked, confused and nervous.

"You see... I am hiding that I am the Chosen at the Order for several reasons, so you need to not publicly recognize me as such. To not slip up by accident, it would be best if you got used to calling me something else. Something less... formal," Jake said.

"I... I could use My Excellence?" Scarlett tried, though it looked to hurt her to use such an "informal" term.

"Yeah... again, some problems there. It wouldn't make any sense. We both got a Blessing, and the one I am hiding my True Blessing to look like is not that high, so you speaking to me like an authority makes little sense," Jake said, scratching the back of his head.

Scarlett looked lost for words, just staring at him.

"It would be best if you could just call me by my name-"

He saw the poor snake girl's head turn red, and her eyes went wide as she looked just about to melt down.

"-or maybe just call me Lord Thayne still?" Jake tried to save it."

After a while, Scarlett collected herself. "I..."

"Heh! Silly snake! Hey, Jake, she sure is bad at using names, right Jake? You see, Jake and I are friends, so I can call him Jake, and he can call me Sandy!" the cosmic worm clearly bragged to Scarlett while wriggling proudly.

Scarlett clenched her fists. "I- I can also call him...Ja... Lord Thayne!"

It looked like merely uttering the sentence had taken more energy than slaying a hundred C-grades for the poor snake girl. She looked nervously at Jake, who just smiled at her while mentally giving Sandy a high-five for the assist. Not that he was sure Sandy had intended to help and not just make fun of Scarlett. This content belongs to novel.fire.net

"Should we get going then?" Jake asked.

Scarlett nodded with delight as Sandy also decided to follow them. Sylphie quickly headed off again with her parents, only telling Jake that she wanted to evolve soon but wanted to "make better friends with the wind first."

Rick, of course, stayed in his cave. He was a cave troll, after all. A cave troll gardener close to C-grade.

Jake did not need to say goodbye to anyone else. Primarily because he could just head home within five or ten minutes if need be.

The trip back to the Mangrove was fast and easy, and they quickly headed down to the formation below the Mangrove where the snake Scarlett called Old Grumpy was still hard to work. Sandy commented on the way how funny teleportation circles were while at the same time talking about how easy it would be to mess with them.

Once they made it down to the large underground tunnel, however, Sandy shut up. The Genesis Cosmic Worm looked lost as they stared at the runes on the walls and began to move around.

"This is... awesome," Sandy said, wriggling closer to a specific wall with a bunch of runes. *"So cool! Oh! This one does that? Wha... wait... ah! Yeah, that makes sense... but why does the dust move like..."*

The worm was utterly engrossed as Old Grumpy made his way over. *"I greet the Chosen and the Mistress. Have you come to make use of the teleporter?"*

Jake nodded. "That we have. You said I was ready, right?"

"Indeed! Please follow me... but what is that creature you brought along?" Old Grumpy asked.

Said worm whipped around as fast as a super-shrunk space worm could. *"Hi! I am Sandy! Did you make this place?"*

The old snake considered the worm for a moment before bowing. *"I cannot take credit for such a feat; it is all through the guidance of the Malefic One. It gladdens me to encounter one who surpasses myself. May I know if thee have any criticisms?"*

"I wanted to ask you for stuff!" Sandy responded in a very happy tone.

"Let's get us teleported, and then you two can chat, eh?" Jake asked with a smile, happy to see Sandy able to get along with another beast.

"As the Chosen wills," Old Grumpy answered and led them to the central chamber.

Once they stood on it, the old snake did some stuff, and Jake felt the formation hum to life. Sandy looked on interested during it all and even made some small comments here and there.

The connection to the first universe through the void formed and strengthened as Jake felt his True Blessing and his potent karmic connection to the Malefic Viper function as the catalyst to allow the teleportation.

He reached out and held Scarlett's hand to make sure she was brought along. Just as they were about to be swept away, Jake heard Sandy make one last comment:

“Oh! It uses the True Blessing! Does that mean I could use it with my True Blessing from the Boundless Hydra after some modifications?”

And Jake nearly broke his hand from Scarlett tensing up as they teleported back to the Order.

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

Chapter 575: Back To School Season

Man, who would have ever thought that one could miss school? He even leaned into tropes by bringing a transfer student along...

A transfer student that was frozen in panic even as she and Jake appeared in the grassy area outside of his way too large mansion in the Order of the Malefic Viper. Jake's hand was squeezed so hard he had no way of releasing it as poor Scarlett tried to process everything.

“I... is... is the worm the...?” Scarlett stammered out nervously.

“Chosen of Snappy? Yep,” Jake confirmed casually. “Ah, but keep that a secret too. I haven't really discussed it with Sandy, but we may as well keep it hidden.”

“Wi... will-“

“No, Sandy does not give a flying fuck about any kind of perceived disrespect or whatever,” Jake answered, already knowing what the poor snake girl wanted to ask. Spending so much time with Miranda really hadn't done her much good on that front as she now knew far more about the Order and the structure, as well as how important of a character the Lord Protector was.

Scarlett looked like she was about to ask more as movement came from within the mansion. Jake looked over and smiled as a familiar face peeked her head out. The elf's eyes opened wide as she saw him.

“Lord Thayne!” she yelled and quickly ran out and over to him. Jake noticed her level had grown yet again and quite fast too.

[Elf – lvl 163]

“It's been too long,” Jake waved at her.

Scarlett also finally let go of his hand as she stared at the elven woman running over with a frown. Meira barely seemed to notice the snake girl as she stopped a few steps from Jake.

“Welcome back to the Order, Lord Thayne!” she said with a deep bow and a smile.

Jake smiled as she just stood there. She didn’t ask why he had left so suddenly back when Ell’Hakan had invaded but would wait for him to tell her himself. If he wanted to tell her. Coupled with her progress, Jake also saw she had tended to things properly as she looked over to a certain spot on the lawn. Quite a large spot as the grass had been cleared, and a large formation was made instead with an object placed in the middle – a large boulder of sorts with holes in.

It was the Pollendust Bee Queen ritual circle. Jake had not forgotten it, and he was glad to see that neither had Meira.

“Are things progressing well with the circle?” Jake asked Meira as he looked at it.

“Yes, my lord! In your absence, I had taken the initiative and acquired some extra cores when I ran out to keep supplying it with energy, and I apologize if that was overstepping,” Meira said apologetically.

“You prioritized the ritual; why would that be overstepping?” Jake smiled. The ritual had indeed progressed as he wanted, and with every passing day, the energy within the egg that the boulder housed in its spatially expanded interior grew stronger and stronger. Still dormant, mind you, but Jake was building up to something. He had delayed finishing the ritual and actually awakening the Bee Queen for quite a simple reason: he didn’t want a D-grade Queen.

Jake wanted to hatch a C-grade. Insect monsters – or ectognamorphs – were quite a bit different than other monster types, and queens were even more different. They were very much a caste-based race, and Jake wanted a powerful Queen from the get-go. The chances of birthing what the books described as a true “Hive Queen” were low if done through evolution, but Jake believed it was possible to do using this ritual and some special Jake sauce.

He was not ignorant of the effect he apparently had on beasts and monsters. Sylphie and Sandy were proof of what happened when Jake interfered in the evolutionary process, even just by a little. How or why he was like that, he didn’t know, but he knew it had to have something to do with his Bloodline.

Anyway, to hatch a C-grade, there were some requirements. The most important of which was the source of energy in the ritual having to be at least of that level, meaning Jake had to at least be C-grade to get the result he wanted. However, it wasn’t like he was delaying spawning a C-grade only because he had to wait for his own evolution, as the egg also needed ample time to grow.

Before the egg could even absorb C-grade energy, it needed to grow enough through the absorption of D-grade energy and Records. That is what Jake was currently doing – or had Meira do – and it helped create a powerful foundation. Once it was saturated, Jake could introduce C-grade energy, hopefully leading to a qualitative change and making it into a C-grade egg that Jake could further mutate using Jake Records.

“Thank you, Lord Thayne,” Meira still bowed, even if Jake said it was fine. Finally, she turned and looked at Scarlett. “May I know who the guest My Lord has brought along is?”

He felt like she had an odd emphasis on the word “my” but didn’t really think about it. He probably misunderstood.

“Scarlett, Meira, Meira, Scarlett,” Jake quickly introduced them. “Meira works here and is a friend, and Scarlett is a friend from my home planet that helped me out quite a few times.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Meira bowed to Scarlett.

Scarlett looked between Jake and Meira before slightly bowing to Meira. “Nice to meet you too.”

Jake was happy to see them be polite to each other. Way better than the last time he introduced friends to each other. “Have you been doing well while I was gone?” Jake asked the elf.

“Yes, Lord Thayne. I have attended lessons regularly, and the honored Grand Elder still taught me nearly daily until recently,” she answered with a big smile. “The Grand Elder will surely also be happy to welcome you back. However, I have not seen the Grand Elder for the last week as he has been busy assisting the Malefic One, making him leave me with self-study material.”

Scarlett perked up at the mention of the Malefic One and looked at Meira again a bit weirdly. Jake butted in to explain. “Meira is getting taught by Duskleaf, the disciple of the Viper.”

He had thought that explanation would help, but no. The poor snake girl once again became nervous and bowed. “I apologize for not recognizing the Grand Disciple of the Malefic One.”

“Okay, none of that. Use names, you two. Besides, if you join the Order too, I am sure Duskleaf would also give you a few tips here and there,” Jake said with a shake of his head. “But first, we have to get you into the Order, of course.”

“How would one undertake such an honor?” Scarlett asked with much interest.

“That...” Jake was about to answer when he stopped. He... kind of didn’t know? He had joined the Academy of the Order, but, thinking about it, had Jake ever properly joined the Order? What did it even mean to properly join the Order? He knew from Viridia’s propaganda lesson that for anyone with a Blessing, becoming a member was just a formality, so it shouldn’t be a challenge. He just wasn’t sure how it could be done.

In retrospect, maybe he should have paid more attention during the lesson...

“Do you have any talent in alchemy?” Jake asked her.

“Sadly, this one is only skilled in the cultivation of personal venoms,” Scarlett admitted. There was no hint of shame or embarrassment in the statement, though. Which was good, as Jake didn’t see it as a demerit either. Being specialized was good.

Jake knew that as a member of the Order, Scarlett would also semi-join the Academy in that she could attend lessons if she wanted. The few combat lessons there were would maybe interest her. It would be a bit like Draskil, who Jake knew wasn’t really into any kind of traditional alchemy either.

As he considered how to make her join, Meira spoke up. “My Lord, any official from the Order of the Malefic Viper is capable of initiating new members into the Order, and those with sufficient rank can grant membership without further approval as long as the proper steps are undertaken.”

“Oh?” Jake asked, surprised. “Have you been looking into joining the Order?”

“I... had lessons about it,” she answered. Jake frowned as he knew from her tone she didn’t talk about Academy lessons but those she got before she came to work for Jake. It did make sense, though. Jake remembered the vampire crafter who had helped him upgrade his necklace and her explanation of how she had been a slave once. It made sense that slaves were taught how to potentially stop being slaves and join, at the very least, to give them false hope.

“What do these steps entail?” Jake inquired further.

“Personal approval of a member, signage of a contract with agreed-upon terms, and an evaluation of talent. Usually, a background search will also be done, along with a karmic reading,” Meira dutifully explained. “However, for those with Blessings, none of this is needed besides the contract of terms, and all the contract will entail is that membership remains active as long as the Blessing is not withdrawn or denounced. At least for lower-tier Blessings... I am not sure about the procedures for those with Greater or Divine Blessings, much less a True Blessing.”

Jake nodded. Getting her to join should be easy enough, then. He was also pleasantly surprised by Meira, as getting her to talk so much tended to be damn hard, especially

with her not getting nervous. She had spoken with great confidence, and Jake felt oddly proud of her.

"Thanks for the explanation, Meira," Jake smiled at her and gave her a thumbs-up.

"It... I only did as expected..." she muttered nervously.

And we're back.

Shaking his head, Jake turned to Scarlett. "Seems like getting you in should be easy enough. Wanna get it fixed right away?"

Jake was not one to delay things, even if he had just returned.

"Yes, please!" Scarlett nodded as if she had just been asked if she wanted a high-tier natural treasure with toxic properties.

Taking out his token, Jake felt how it was now active again after returning. The token did not work on Earth for obvious reasons as it functioned off some grand formation somewhere in the Order, Jake reckoned. He infused energy into it and made a call to someone he hadn't contracted in a while.

It connected, and he instantly heard her voice.

"Lord Thayne! It has been quite a while since anyone heard anything from you. Is everything all right? Did you enter secluded training? Ah, sorry for blabbering; I assume you contacted me for a reason. What can I do for you?" Irin the succubus asked. She was an official of the Order and the first one Jake thought to contact. He did also have the contact information of the Hall Master, Viridia, but it seemed a bit much to call the CEO of a company with billions of workers to help register a new employee.

"Hey Irin, been a while, yeah. And everything is fine; I just had to deal with some issues back on Earth. An enemy Chosen thought it was a good idea to invade the planet and raise a ruckus, so I had a civil war and an asshole Chosen to deal with before I could return. It is fixed for now, but still annoying. Anyway, the reason I contacted you was that I brought along a friend from my home planet who would like to join the Order of the Malefic Viper. She got a Blessing, so it should be possible, right?" Jake asked her while also explaining what he had been up to. It just seemed nice to tell her after he had gone AWOL.

After a brief period of silence, she responded.

"That sounds... way above my pay grade. The Chosen stuff. When it comes to joining the Order, it is nothing more than a meager formality only simplified further by her already having a Blessing. Would it be possible for me to come by?" Irin asked.

"Sure thing," Jake approved.

"I will be around in a few minutes. Good to hear from you again, Lord Thayne," Irin finished. He disconnected the call and turned back to Scarlett.

"I will have a friend come by in a bit to help you join," Jake said with a smile.

"Thank you!" Scarlett bowed once more.

Jake went over to do a quick check-up of the Bee Queen formation while he waited and made sure nothing had gone awry. As he analyzed the formation, he noticed a few spots where it felt... lacking. Jake was not sure that was wrong, but he knew there were faint flaws or at least places with room for improvement. He made mental notes to address this later and once more thanked his high Perception for allowing him to notice the problem. Without the stat growth he had experienced since he upgraded the formation last, he would not have noticed these minor elements at all.

As he was still looking things through, a new figure appeared. Jake instantly felt the familiar yet slightly foreign aura that washed out from this arrival. He looked over and saw someone he clearly recognized as Irinixis, but there were some slight differences. The horns on her head had grown slightly and now curved like that of a goat, though they were still small, and her body had some... changes. It was easy to know what had happened.

[Demon – lvl ???] Follow current novels on [novel◇firt◇net](#)

She had naturally evolved to C-grade. The evolution had also not only led to growth in power but also in certain other areas. The red dress with a low-cut front showed off these features quite nicely, and she flashed a radiant smile when she saw Jake while bowing deeply, only emphasizing her improved assets further.

Jake did not have a hard time figuring out why succubi were quite a popular race among the humanoids in the multiverse. *Not gonna lie; she is fucking hot,* Jake admitted. She also was before, but damn, had the evolution done work.

"Thank you for calling upon me, Lord Thayne," Irin greeted him. He also noticed how she threw quick glances at both Meira and Scarlett. Both glaring back at her.

"Thanks for coming," Jake answered with a smile. "And congratulations on the evolution."

"I should be the one thanking you for my recent advances," Irin answered happily. "The opportunities our relationship have offered me are hard to comprehend, and even without those, the Records alone simply from knowing you allowed me smooth sailing. So, please do call me if you ever need anything."

After getting done thanking each other, Jake finally got back on topic. "This here is Scarlett, a friend, and ally from my home planet. Could you give me a hand and get her into the Order? Oh, while you're at it... Meira, what do you say about also trying to join the Order?"

Meira seemed taken aback. "I believe that is premature, Lord Thayne..."

Jake frowned a bit, not sure why it would be, but still shrugged. No rush. "Okay, just Scarlett then."

"It shall be done swiftly," Irin said as she greeted Scarlett. "My name is Irinixis; I am from the Humanoid Resources Department in the Order of the Malefic Viper. The Chosen alone referring you to join makes all of this simply a formality, but I would still offer you to go through the usual evaluation if you so desire."

"Oh, a dungeon again?" Jake asked curiously.

"Indeed," Irin confirmed.

"Should definitely go for it," Jake approved.

"Then I shall take part in this evaluation," Scarlett nodded.

Irin smiled at Scarlett as Jake considered aloud: "Should I also go for reevaluation at some point? Maybe at C-grade?"

"If you desire to, Lord Thayne. However, realistically it will be done for nothing more than vanity, as all the additional bonuses awarded from a better token are meaningless to you. Getting a dark green token would only result in more attention being placed on you," Irin explained.

"Maybe I shouldn't then," Jake muttered.

The demoness smiled and turned to Scarlett again. "Do you wish to begin right away or delay?"

"I wish to join as soon as possible!" Scarlett nodded enthusiastically.

"Then let's go."

With that, Jake sent off Scarlett and Irin right away, Irin making sure to give a low bow to show off before leaving. Meira looked as they left and threw Jake a few questioning gazes but didn't say anything. Jake decided to just initiate the conversation himself.

"Let's head inside, and you can give me the low-down of what has happened around here recently," Jake said to Meira.

“Yes!” the elf agreed as the two of them headed inside.

As it turns out, not much had happened, at least not on a large scale. The entire thing with Ell’Hakan and Yip was clearly not knowledge spread openly, as it likely was – as Irin said – above their pay grade. Jake instead mostly heard of how much Meira had been studying and how she was still hanging out with that other elf Izil. The elf and human then divulged into alchemy talks, and Jake had to admit...

It did feel good to be back in such a low-stress environment. Not for too long, though. As in, only for a bit. Jake prepared to get started immediately with his checklist right away once he had caught up with Meira, and for the next two parts, Jake had a feeling he would need to consult his dear Patron god.

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Chapter 576: Not That Dense... Okay, A Little

Irinixis had wondered what had happened for a while after the Chosen had just one day disappeared. She had no way of contracting him as his token was unreachable, meaning he was either dead or not in the Order. She reckoned the latter for obvious reasons.

Her new teacher, the Velvet Mistress, also agreed that nothing would have happened to him. Geniuses did not die that easily, and if he had been gone, people would have learned about it. Irin also knew that the many statues of the Viper spread around the Order would reflect the loss of a Chosen through their aura, proving that he should be fine. Or that the Viper was capable of shrugging off the loss of a Chosen without much care.

Irin naturally hoped the Chosen was fine as he was her golden ticket. She had gotten a new mistress at the peak of S-grade, her status elevated above anything she could ever imagine, and her evolution had even come earlier than she had expected. Irin had always believed she would be able to reach C-grade, even if she didn’t always vocalize it. However, she did have fears of *how* she would make it to C-grade. D-grade was already the end of the line for most, and while C-grade was expected of her due to her heritage and position, no one expected her to ever reach B-grade. Irin hadn’t expected to ever get a shot at it either. Yet now... now it didn’t seem impossible.

All she had to do was stay in his good graces and, if possible, get even more involved with him, no matter what kind of role she was asked to perform. It was premature, but her ultimate goal was to become his personal liaison between the Order and him. To be

someone officially involved and linked to the Chosen and his matters. But, it was hard to get an "in," so for now, she could only try to deepen their personal relationship. One thing she had learned was that the Chosen cared little for decorum or tradition but preferred casual interactions and demeanors.

Her mistress had made her work on being more appealing to the Chosen, which included unlearning many of her old methods. The Chosen did not seem to enjoy the overly subservient types but wanted someone who treated him far more equally than someone of this status was entitled to. Not too much, though, as Irin still wanted to make it clear she was there to make his life easier while hopefully also being a friendly face.

Anyway, she had worked on this for a long time but had worried as he had not called for her even once. Fortunately, the silence was broken as her token vibrated, and she felt the signature. Elated, she greeted him, and to make it better, he even asked for assistance – even being allowed to make a personal visit.

She had quickly gone and put on some more fitting clothes and got herself ready. The evolution to C-grade had done her many favors if she said so herself, even if the shape of the horns could get a bit annoying and get her hair tangled during showers.

Teleporting to the residence of the Chosen, she was instantly met by two auras surpassing her own. One was from the Chosen, whom she knew, even with her evolution, she stood no chance against. The second one was a female beast who had taken human form and, from the looks of it, was a snake of some kind. Irin also felt the Blessing from the girl and would naturally show the due respect such a thing dictated. Helping her was part of her job and something she would happily do.

However, what she cared most about was the gaze of the Chosen. It lingered for longer than it had to, making Irin very pleased. Still, she had a job to do and showed professionalism despite the gazes of the two other women that were certainly less friendly than the Chosen's. One gaze was from the assigned slave for Lord Thayne called Meira. Irin was a bit surprised he asked if she wanted to join the Order too, indicating he wanted to release her. On-brand based on what Irin had learned of Lord Thayne. If he wanted people to treat him as an equal, the thought of having a slave forced upon him must have been less than ideal. Irin had also learned a bit about Earth from the human called Reika and come to understand a bit of their planet's history – including how slavery was not popular in their part of the world. Downright hated, even.

The other gaze was naturally from the snake woman. A piercing one, Irin had to admit. Luckily she saw neither of them as threats to her goals, even if they were on good terms with Lord Thayne. She also got a feeling that her goals and the goals of the slave elf were somewhat similar, if very different in approach. Both of them wanted to stay integrated with the Chosen, one way or another, to secure their own futures.

With the two girls evaluated, Irin answered some questions and led the prospective member, Scarlett, away. A bow towards the Chosen was only proper, and once more, his gaze lingered for a moment before Irin and the snake girl left. Irin, of course, knew what she was doing.

Was she what humans would call a gold digger? Yes, though the term in the multiverse tended to be parasites for those such as her who forcefully tried to associate themselves with powerful individuals and feed off their Records. She wasn't ashamed of it either.

Lord Thayne wasn't stupid and most certainly not unperceptive. He knew what she was doing and allowed it. If the parasite and target both enjoyed and found benefits in the relationship, it could only be called synergistic, couldn't it?

Finally alone, Jake could relax. Meira had gone off to her own residence to tend to her studies after their lengthy talk, and with Scarlett and Irin also gone, Jake had the main mansion all by himself. Free of the "drama" he had just been a part of, he felt relieved. Jake was a bit dense, sure... but even he could see that the three women were interested in him. Or at least interested in his status.

However, it was honestly easiest to just act like he didn't know. Things were just too complicated. Meira was still his slave, making it break at least a few moral lines to respond to her feelings, and Jake wasn't even sure she actually liked him, even though she thought she did. He had helped her, and she clearly felt indebted to him. Confusing gratitude with stronger emotions was not uncommon at all.

Scarlett was just... no. She reminded Jake of a teenage girl, and she also revered Jake to an unhealthy level. With both her and Meira, the power imbalance in their relationships was all out-of-whacks too. So... yeah, better to just ignore it.

Then there was Irin. That one made felt the most complicated to Jake. So complicated he didn't want to think too much about it but get on with working on his checklist.

Jake had two goals for now. Sagacity of the Malefic Viper and the entire situation with sim-Jake and their joint attempt to create a skill. For both of these, Jake had some issues he needed to overcome. After some consideration, he ultimately decided to take on Sagacity first as he wanted to fully dedicate his attention to the potential mythical skill. Also, the extra Wisdom would be nice.

With no need to delay, he got to work and sat on the sofa in the living room as he leaned back and stared at the ceiling while gathering his thoughts.

He already had some insights into the topic of Sagacity already, especially after the last vision. For a long time, Jake had wondered what the point of the Sagacity skill even truly was. For a good reason too.

[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – To hold just a fragment of the wisdom of a Primordial is more than most ever achieve. Much less to be personally taught that knowledge directly by the god himself. Allows the Alchemist to peek into a fragment of the Malefic Viper's Records to seek his knowledge. Grants the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper a far better understanding of mana and of most affinities. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill). Passively provides 1 Wisdom per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your search for knowledge be as inexhaustible as the Malefic One. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [novel•fire•net](http://novel.fire.net)

Sure, it did help Jake in some ways, but it was minimal. It had two primary passive elements: a better understanding of mana and the ability to craft without associated crafting skills. The first part had some value, but it was just a small passive bonus that he barely noticed.

Then there was the thing about not needing a crafting skill. It sounded nice, but... Jake had these crafting skills. He had all he needed, and his evolutions tended to just give the skills if he wanted them or not. Also, if Jake could choose, he would want the crafting skill anyway for the stat effectiveness bonus that Sagacity did not offer.

To summarize, Jake only really got anything out of the extra Wisdom and the mana thing. Which seemed really subpar compared to all his other Malefic Viper Legacy skills.

Okay, there was one final active part of the skill: to peer into the Record Fragment of the Viper. This part had been pretty useful, but... Jake couldn't see why he needed a skill for that. He had stolen the drop of blood without a skill, hadn't he? And he also restrained it within his Soulspace quite easily.

So, to summarize, Jake found little value in the Sagacity skill and even wondered what its primary function was and why the Viper had it, as clearly the blood-peering part was not a part of the Viper's version. At least Jake had wondered this until the latest vision. He had kind of misunderstood the core of Sagacity from the beginning, not realizing that the reality was... the skill wasn't made for the enlightened races. It was made for monsters.

Jake had seen the Viper try and craft without the required crafting skill and seen how difficult it was. It was, without exaggerating, a hundred times harder than crafting with a skill. The Viper had struggled to make health potions even after he found the issue, and that was while in C-grade. Jake could only imagine the pain of having to do this entire process of figuring out a "manual" approach to every new alchemical method. But Jake had a feeling the Viper had done exactly this and then condensed it into this one skill. A skill that was now part of his Legacy and could be obtained or taught to other monsters, allowing them to benefit from his trial and error.

It was a catch-all skill for alchemy crafting. A way for monsters to still be alchemists and compete on a far more equal playing field with the enlightened races. The things about affinities and mana were just passive elements gained from a better understanding of the fundamental principles of how alchemy worked. Or, perhaps, an added bonus as the system knew the significantly reduced value the Sagacity skill had for someone like Jake.

He felt like he was on the right track, but some things still bothered him... and while he tended to prefer to avoid it, he decided to approach the source of the skill itself to confirm his theory.

"Hey, Villy-"

"Yeah?" a voice answered as a smirking god stared straight down at Jake's face, obstructing his vision of the nice ceiling.

"I thought you were busy?" Jake answered without moving.

"I am. That is why you are talking to this avatar and not the real me," Villy said as he jumped over the back of the couch and sat on it. "Can you tell the difference?"

Jake stared at the so-called avatar for a moment and tried to find any indications of it not being the real thing. The aura was vast and powerful as usual, but in its muted state, Jake had a hard time getting a read on it. "No, not really," he admitted.

"No need to be embarrassed, you weren't meant to, and this avatar can exert a good ten percent of my full power if push comes to shove," Villy explained. "But this is not why you asked for me. What seems to trouble my little Chosen this time around? Oh, if it is love advice, then sure, you have fun with the succubus as you are both consenting adults, plus she seems like a fun one, and-"

"I wanted to ask about something with the First Sage," Jake interrupted loudly.

Villy shut up but still smirked. "He didn't strike me as your type, so not love advice, I see. What do you want to know?"

"It is actually more about Sagacity than it is about him, but I have a feeling they are related. Firstly, the name Sagacity was not chosen randomly or decided by the system, was it?" Jake asked.

After a few moments of thinking, the Viper sighed. "No, it was not. As you probably already guessed, then the skill is named after the First Sage. Tell me, what else have you concluded about this peculiar little skill?"

"It was made as a way to allow monsters to do alchemy without the crafting skills by creating one that does it all. It relies on your experiences and what you learned to fill in the gaps left by not having the many alchemical crafting skills," Jake explained.

"Partly accurate. Yes, it is good for monsters and primarily used by them. Shit, Sagacity is one of the main reasons why monsters who specialize in alchemy prefer the Order over other places like the Altmar Empire, and Sagacity is one of the few Legacy skills that can be taught; the Records easily obtained to get the skill during a skill selection. But, you missed that also certain enlightened races with only a profession or a class can make great use of it. Plus, it is a skill tied to my Legacy and not necessarily to the alchemy profession, meaning even those with a profession utterly unrelated to alchemy can get it and become part-time alchemists," Villy corrected Jake.

"Was it yours or the First Sage's idea to make this kind of all-encompassing skill?" Jake asked. He still felt a bit bad about not telling Villy about what he had felt at the end of the last vision, where clearly the First Sage had been aware of him before the Viper knew. Which made Jake wonder if what the Viper had done – learned to craft without a crafting skill – was one of the reasons the First Sage wanted to take him in, to begin with.

"Hm, a bit of both," Villy answered. "He did tell me one of the reasons he wanted to teach me was to also learn from me. He was interested in all sorts of ways one could perform magic without any skill or system assistance, as well as how one could make use of the peculiarities of the system. His teachings were part of the reason I advised you to practice mana the first time we met."

The Viper smiled a bit to himself. "The old man used to have a saying that the experiences gained by he who knows nothing are infinitely more valuable than he who follows a false truth, as only the true essence of reality can be found by an unspoiled mind. In other words, the potential truths one can learn alone without guidance are worth far more than those merely taught. Think of your arcane affinity. If I had told you about how to find an arcane affinity and how you could try and create one, I doubt it would have ever manifested. In some ways, your ignorance led to it appearing, as its very nature is rooted in your basic understanding of mana."

"I do remember you mentioning something like that before," Jake nodded. "But Sagacity strikes me more as a skill that is heavily tied to prior experiences and not new discoveries."

"True, true. Partly," Villy nodded in agreement. "Sagacity is, as you said, the result of a combined effort of the First Sage and me to make a methodology for those who cannot gain the alchemy profession. At least, that was the initial core of the skill, but it has, from there, expanded. The core now revolves around my experience and knowledge more than simply crafting methods. Your version also has some elements related to mana, and you got a drop of blood that contains Records, right? Those are now also tied to it. So, to sum it up for ya, Sagacity is knowledge incarnate."

Jake opened his mouth to ask something but forgot it instantly as a lightbulb went off.
"I... think I have an idea what to do..."

"Then my job here is done," Villy smiled.

"May need you for something else if you are up for it later," Jake said.

"Then I guess we will see each other again soon," the Viper answered as he popped out of existence.

Jake didn't delay but instantly got himself comfortable and entered meditation. Once more, Jake felt like he had missed something very obvious...

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Chapter 577: The Library of a Sage

Alone again, Jake had time to think. As Villy had said, then the core of Sagacity was knowledge, also reflected by it granting Wisdom. Yet Jake had not really received any instinctual knowledge when he got the skill about anything related to alchemy. It did add knowledge through the drop of blood, but Jake didn't count that as it was just another potential source. The knowledge of mana affinities did kind of count, but that was more just another way to identify things... which led to Jake's realization.

Jake had learned a lot since he became an alchemist, especially in recent times after joining the Order. He had gone through so many damn books, studied the drop of blood quite a bit, and eaten like a madman for Palate. Yet, even if he had done all of this, he had not been given a single upgrade to the two skills he had that dealt with alchemical knowledge. Herbology and Toxicology

[Herbology (Common)] – Grants knowledge of herbs found throughout the multiverse. The most numerous source of natural treasures comes in the form of herbs found throughout existence. The knowledge of plants and their effects is, therefore, essential to any alchemist. An alchemist must know what he works with in order to create his products after all. Grants the ability to recognize herbs at a glance and correctly identify their properties.

[Toxicology (Uncommon)] – The knowledge of all that is toxic. Be able to recognize poisonous substances at a glance and correctly identify their properties. To concoct the deadliest toxins, one must know what to mix after all.

Jake had these skills since the very beginning of his journey as an alchemist, neither of them upgrading or even showing signs of getting upgraded. Not getting one upgraded in E-grade was kind of understandable, but how could he not have upgraded one of them at D-grade? Especially Herbology that was stuck at common rarity? Toxicology, too, should have at least shown some signs of upgrading. That, or Jake should have at least an idea of how to improve them.

Now, Jake realized that these two would never upgrade. Not because Jake sucked so bad at learning things about toxic materials or herbs, but because the Records required to upgrade the skills went somewhere else: Sagacity of the Malefic Viper.

The Legacy of the Malefic Viper was a complete system for alchemy. With those nine skills alone, a monster or even a member of the enlightened could become an exceptional alchemist in no way inferior to more traditional ones. At least not when it came to poisons. To achieve this, the usual skills alchemists got from their profession had to also exist in some shape or form within the Legacy, including the knowledge-related skills that allowed him to know what he was looking at. Would it not only make sense for Sagacity to be where this knowledge was focused?

In fact, wasn't this logic also true with other passive skills or even active skills Jake had? Cultivate Toxin was already heavily related to Palate of the Malefic Viper, and Jake could also see Touch be related to Alchemist's Purification... maybe even the Alchemical Flame, though Jake had a suspicion that one was a bit different. *Stuff for later. Focus on Sagacity now.*

Jake believed that Toxicology and Herbology had both become obsolete, yet they still remained skills. Which led him to the most obvious conclusion: have Sagacity absorb them. He had tried two skills seemingly unrelated to the Malefic Viper influence and even formed a Malefic Viper skill before, so he knew it was possible. One had to remember that Sense of the Malefic Viper had come from the merging of Sense Herb and Sense Poison all the way back in G-grade. However, back then, it had happened by itself, making Jake think there was more to upgrading Sagacity than merely merging the skills. Or maybe he didn't know how to merge them?

As he kept considering the skill, he went in the direction of what Sagacity was linked to. Sagacity was a bit like the focal point of all knowledge his other skills gave him. It was fed by Palate and Sense all the time. All he learned went into the Records of Sagacity, but also things he didn't know went into it. That is when another light bulb went off.

Back when Herbology and Toxicology had been gained, another skill had been affected. A skill that was even mentioned in both their descriptions: Identify. Jake slapped his knee and grinned as he activated his Path of the Heretic Chosen skill. He hadn't been sure, but the system thought he had considered the skill enough to be granted a vision.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 1

It was the final use, and Jake smiled to himself as he was whisked away.

"The system is limitless in possibilities. Even an immortal could spend an infinite lifetime to try and learn everything, yet after countless years the immortal would only come to learn that he has not progressed at all. For as he learns, new knowledge appears. This very same folly is what you are pursuing right now," the old man said with a smile. This chapter is updated by novel~fire~net

In front of him sat the Malefic Viper, deep in thought, as he considered the words. Jake had appeared as usual, and predictably, he had popped in with the First Sage present. Jake was sure by now that the system wanted him to keep seeing this old man... that, or he had so much influence on Villy's formative years that seeing him was unavoidable.

"So you are saying I need to change course?" Villy asked with a deep frown.

"You misunderstand, for omniscience does exist; it is merely reserved for the system itself. It knows all, and sometimes the key is not to learn everything yourself but find a way to make the system give you the knowledge you require. To prove yourself worthy and entitled to the knowledge you demand. Your approach so far has been good, but it is not sustainable. You seek to learn of all herbs or toxins yourself, developing general skills based on your experiences, but as you progress, you will come to learn how unfeasible this is," the First Sage continued.

Once more, the Viper was deep in thought. After a bit, he voiced his considerations.

"I do see the problem... trying to design a method for every kind of potential product and with every single combination of ingredients is impossible. Just learning enough about different ingredients is utterly unfeasible..." the Viper spoke.

Jake nodded along as he knew the direction it was going. He saw on the face of the First Sage that he was also hoping for the Viper to realize what he meant. It felt good that Jake knowing he had figured it out before the snake god. Second time in a row too.

The Viper asked a few more minor questions as he slowly understood. With realization, his eyes opened wide. "Will the system allow such a thing? No... will it actively help to do something like that?"

"Never has the system demanded perfection, only adequate proof that you are qualified. Invisible thresholds are in place for us to discover, and all it requires of you is to pass this threshold, and it shall assist you," the First Sage answered.

As for what they were talking about? Well, system assistance, or more accurately, to have the skill recognized as what the Viper wanted it to be. He had hit the nail on its head already: manually improving everything was simply impossible.

When Jake used Brew Potion, the system assistance from the skill always did the same thing – at least if one focused on the outcome. However, in reality, its effects varied for each individual craft. No two ingredients were one hundred percent identical, sometimes it took a millisecond later to heat something, or perhaps a single more point of mana was injected. All of this led to variation, and with each variation, the minor corrections from system assistance varied in turn.

This is to say that if Villy wanted to make Sagacity based solely on his own experiences, then it would never work as he naturally couldn't have an identical experience as anyone else. No, what Sagacity – his current version, too – did was adopt the functionality of the usual system assistance. Because the system obviously knew exactly what corrections had to be made.

As for how the Viper had realized this goal... well, Jake guessed it still had to do with a shitload of trial and error and learning how to craft a myriad of different things manually. Then, at some point, he had passed a threshold, as the First Sage said, and the gaps had been filled in.

Of course, none of this related to the upgrade Jake wanted. This was just Jake finally understanding how his current version worked. However, realizing how it worked with the crafting skills allowed Jake to understand that the same concept applied to the alchemical knowledge skills.

Almost as if the old man had known of Jake's thoughts, he continued.

"The same is true when it comes to the knowledge of what. Learning the how of crafting only matters after you know what you can craft with and become able to recognize potential. Right now, you use ingredients you have consumed countless of, or at most variants. You know them, but what about when you encounter something new? You eat it, I would reckon, but is that truly the best approach to learning even just the basics?" the First Sage asked.

Jake barely had to listen anymore as he already knew what he wanted to do and what direction he wanted to take the skill. He had not even reached the crucial part of the vision yet, where he merged with the Viper, but had already begun his own process of upgrading the skill.

Merging Herbology and Toxicology into Sagacity was a given. Keeping the crafting skills separate had a purpose, at least for now, so he had no interest in merging those, but the knowledge-related skills had no extra bonus. They just passively gave knowledge that he could access through Identify.

So, if he combined the two, it only made sense for Identify to also pull from Sagacity. It perhaps already did; Jake had no way of being sure. Jake reckoned it did pull from Sagacity, as Jake guessed one of the reasons he even got the skill selection option was

because of the Trial of Myriad Poisons, which gave him a lot of knowledge through Palate. An event that should, in retrospect, have resulted in at least Herbology evolving.

But... Jake was not satisfied with merely pulling on Sagacity when he used Identify. The First Sage talked about pulling knowledge directly from the system. The Sagacity skill already did this in his usual form, but Jake did not have the usual form. He had a bastardized version tied to a drop of blood from the Viper. A drop of blood that Jake controlled inside his Soulspace. So, why couldn't Jake pull on this drop too? Link himself more with it and extract knowledge in a similar fashion to the old Herbology and Toxicology did?

Jake split his attention between his own internal thoughts and plans and the conversation between the Viper and the First Sage. The old man spoke more words of wisdom as the Viper worked on properly creating the Sagacity skill for perhaps the very first time. It likely hadn't been called Sagacity back then, but Jake knew it was a massive undertaking, nevertheless.

It was creating a framework. An entire methodology separate from traditional alchemy, all boiled into a single skill. Some corners had to be cut – such as the lack of stat effectiveness bonuses – and several other minor things here and there. This first version would be a far cry from what Sagacity was during the ninety-third era, but it was a monumental feat for a C-grade.

Such a monumental feat that the Viper obviously struggled. He had a hard time getting it all together and creating a framework capable of facilitating such a massive undertaking. He had clearly worked on it a lot, but even as the time in the vision sped up, he lacked progress. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years. The Viper was unmoving for more than a decade as the First Sage never left his side. He remained there to answer any questions the Viper possibly had, even if months could pass between each time the Viper exited meditation.

Yet even after this long, the Viper was not done. Frustration began to appear on the future Primordial's face.

"I... It's difficult," the Viper said, shaking his head. "There are too many elements, too much to slot into place..."

"Visualize it," the First Sage said. "A metaphor is there to ease understanding. Simplify elements into a concept you do understand. What does your skill look like in your mind?"

"I..." the Viper said as he frowned, not saying more. It was obvious he wasn't sure where to go or what to do.

The First Sage sighed. "Once. Once I can assist you."

The Viper perked up. "Really, Master?"

"Yes. But only this once," the old man nodded as he stood up. He went over to the Viper and knelt in front of the cross-legged snake in human form. He smiled at his disciple as Villy began to look a bit conflicted. Worried, even.

"I already promised. Now, allow yourself to indulge in creation. Open your mind," the First Sage spoke as he raised a hand... and Jake felt like the world twisted.

He felt something he had only ever felt once more. Like the bounds of reality shifted to allow the impossible through sheer will and enlightenment. The hand gave off an aura that pressured him on a fundamental level as he even felt his heartbeat speed up. There was not a shred of doubt in his mind...

A Transcendence.

Jake had no idea what it did... but he knew he was about to find out. This had to be the most important part of the vision, and the system also clearly agreed as Jake felt himself merge fully with the Viper the second before the old man laid his palm on the head of the Viper.

A cool sensation spread throughout the Viper's – and thus Jake's – body. His mind felt clearer than ever before. Then everything changed. The walls of the room they were in disintegrated, revealing a world of nothingness beyond. A perfect white void, reminiscent of the spaces the system had conjured at times.

"Everything needs a foundation. Allow your mind to form the Origin," the voice of the First Sage echoed. He was nowhere to be found, and yet it felt like he was everywhere.

The Viper focused as a massive disc of stone appeared below his feet, more than fifty meters in diameter. Jake felt how Villy somehow knew what to do, despite not being entirely sure *why* he knew.

"Visualize your desires. What do you want – nay – demand of the skill? Breathe in, and with your exhale, may your reality materialize."

Villy inhaled as some unknown particles entered his body. In the next second, he breathed out as a storm of colored wisps exited his mouth. They swirled as a wood-like structure appeared on the edges of the disc in all directions as if the Viper was building a tower around him.

The wood-like structure began to morph further as it was divided all over. It took Jake a moment until he realized what was being made. They were bookshelves.

These shelves shot upwards into the white sky, expanding beyond Jake's realm of Perception within a mere second as they just seemed to keep going. Then, from the bottom, books began to appear. All of them had the exact same black blank cover, but each gave off a slightly different sensation.

A hundred, thousand, million, billion... the books kept multiplying. Infinitely into the sky, though at some point, they stopped giving him any sensations. He knew it was because they had no content... no Records.

"A library of a sage. Its contents are not infinite, but it contains infinite space for expansion. The system allowed the role of the scribe as the blank books are filled with insight upon your demand. You, the sole librarian. With time, omniscience the goal," the First Sage spoke, narrating what the Viper made.

"An ambitious desire. Can you truly realize it?"

The old man appeared as he stood in front of Jake and Villy. He held out his hand with the palm up as the Viper reached out. Villy held his own hand in front of the palm of the Sage as he gritted his teeth. Blood began to flow out of his eyes, ears, and nose as a bloody mist began to seep out of his body. There was something off with the blood, though.

This entire place was not real, or at least it wasn't directly linked to the outside world. The blood seeping out represented something different from physical damage. A sacrifice. An offering. It took Jake a moment to realize, but soon enough, he knew what it was. It was the Records of another skill. Villy was upgrading it or maybe sacrificing it to get what would eventually become Sagacity.

Jake watched on intently as the blood pooled together and formed a single drop. Then, in the very next moment, the entire library tower that Villy had created began to turn red and melt into blood. The blood pooled together towards the center of the platform they stood on before rising up and merging with the droplet. Finally, even the platform turned into blood and merged with the droplet.

"An offering made, a framework created, an Origin formed. Now claim it," the First Sage said as his own body faded away.

The drop of blood floated forward and entered the forehead of the Viper. The moment it entered his body, the white void around them shattered like it had been made of glass. As the world itself fell apart, Jake tried to understand everything that had happened. He had so many questions, and he hoped to maybe figure out what the hell the First Sage had actually done.

Villy's body disappeared, disconnecting Jake from him and leaving him to float alone, ready for time to rewind again. He really wanted to once more experience the-

The collapsing world froze. It was as if time itself had stopped, and Jake felt an attention focus on him. In the next moment, the First Sage appeared right in front of Jake and stared straight at him.

“Records not of this time. An Origin that-“

And then Jake was back in his living room.

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Chapter 578: Profession = Done

Jake just sat and stared into the wall for a good few seconds, wondering what the actual fuck had just happened. It was as if the vision had been interrupted somehow or maybe forcefully ended. Or, maybe it was always meant to end in this fashion? Though that would also be incredibly odd.

The skill had allowed Jake to do something he thought was impossible. He had experienced a Transcendence, a skill that should be outside the system. Based on what Jake knew, a normal skill like his Path of the Heretic-Chosen should not have allowed this, in the same way that no skill would allow someone to hide from Jake's Bloodline-made Sphere of Perception.

Yet, it had. Maybe it was because Jake experienced Records of the past as they were? Though this experience did make him wonder if it truly was like that. Jake remembered how it felt like Valdemar had, in some vague way, been aware of Jake. Meanwhile, this time, the First Sage had one-hundred percent been aware.

Did this mean that all the way back in the first era, these two actually saw him? If that was the case, didn't it kind of play into the whole theory of pre-determination as it would mean that the system knew, all the way back in the first era, that Jake could be born in the ninety-third era and then get a skill to view these Record Fragments?

Or maybe it created a new kind of reality if they noticed, a bit like the simulated world sim-Jake came from... it was hard to tell.

Then there was the entire Transcendence itself. Villy had said the First Sage had several, and this was Jake's first time seeing one. What it actually did, Jake had no idea, but he reckoned it had something to do with skill creation or modification somehow. If that was the case, it was a damn strong one, especially as it could be used on other people, though it did make Jake question the repercussions of using such a

skill. The First Sage had clearly wanted to avoid using it and had said he would only help once, indicating there was a good reason to not overuse this Transcendence.

Though Jake could not argue with the result. Even now, Jake remembered the feelings he shared with the Viper. The sheer level of comprehension as he felt like every book was at his fingertips. How his mind was clearer than ever, and only his desire to create the skill mattered. To call it enlightenment was not quite accurate, as it felt... different. Like it was more than that.

Jake shook his head as he tried to focus on what he could control and what mattered. To upgrade his Sagacity. While this vision had been the weirdest one he had ever experienced by quite a margin, it had done its job quite efficiently.

Visualizing a skill was not anything new to Jake. He was pretty good at visualizing things, his Soulspace being proof of that with a massive cursed chimera monster roaming about. Jake was a very visual person by nature, something his insane Perception should maybe have indicated. Seeing the library that the First Sage had Villy build made Jake understand far better what Sagacity truly was.

And allowed him to upgrade his own version.

Jake sat down in meditation as he got to work to properly condense all he had learned and all he wanted into the skill. He felt right at the cusp even before the vision and was now more sure than ever. In fact, he felt a bit bolder than before.

It still ended up taking nearly a full day for Jake to get what he wanted, but he got it in the end.

[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient --> Legendary)] – Blood containing Records, personal teachings, insights from a sage, and the knowledge of a traditional alchemist. Combined, you bring honor to your Patron as you strive for omniscience. Allows the Alchemist to extract knowledge from a fragment of the Malefic Viper's Records to claim his knowledge as your own. Grants the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper a far better understanding of mana and of most affinities. Grants the Alchemist knowledge of a myriad of alchemical ingredients, allowing him to far more easily identify them. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill). Passively provides 3 Wisdom per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your search for knowledge be as inexhaustible as the Malefic One.

Jake felt like an influx of knowledge slammed into his head the moment everything fell into place. It was like a library - akin to the one Villy constructed - appeared in his head and was being reorganized to be more systematic and useable. Almost as if all the alchemical knowledge Jake had before had come from a massive pile of books that had now all been sorted and categorized.

This knowledge was also far more than what he had before. One had to remember that Jake only really had knowledge of herbs and toxic materials, with the Identify skill also being restricted to these two categories of alchemical ingredients. What would have been the geology, metallurgy, and several more skills were part of Sagacity now.

It was all sorted into this metaphorical library, the books ready to be pulled out whenever Identify found something it corresponded to. It was not like Jake suddenly knew a shitload more about rocks, just that he could now at least pull out the knowledge.

This part of the upgrade was great, even if it was more wide than deep, with Jake not immediately seeing much value from his newfound abilities as he couldn't exactly use rocks and metal for much with his usual alchemy methods.

However, it did not end there. Herbology and Toxicology were now gone, but both had been intrinsically tied to another skill of his that now also showed signs of evolving.

Identify was a skill that had last evolved when Jake got his profession and thus the Herbology and Toxicology skill. It had not shown signs of upgrading since, which Jake partly recognized was his fault for never truly trying. Now that it showed signs anyway... Jake dove in as he still felt his mind be clear and focused from the Sagacity upgrade.

The skill did one thing and one thing only: it allowed Jake to peer into the Records of an entity. It could be protected against, but Jake had found ways to circumvent this protection before using his high Perception, so that was the first thing he thought about. Secondly, Jake had spent over a decade practicing how to sense and thus veil his own Blessing. It made no sense for him to not leverage this.

He thought it would have been harder to upgrade the skill... but surprisingly enough, it took little effort as long as he put his mind to it.

[Identify (Common)] - Identification skill, known by all but the smallest of children of the myriad races. The skill allows you to attempt to identify any object or creature you are focusing on.

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[Identify (Rare)] – An improved version of the standard Identification skill, a skill known by all but the smallest of children of the myriad races. The skill allows you to attempt to identify any object or creature you are focusing on. Allows for the detection of Blessings. The identity level limit and effectiveness is based on Perception. Cannot Identify any creature above your own grade.

The skill went up not just one but two entire rarities. The added effects were as expected, and honestly, Jake didn't feel anything different about the skill now compared to before. Seeing the limitation of still being unable to Identify anyone above his grade, it

wasn't like being able to see a potentially higher level-cap mattered either. Though hopefully, it would be useful in C-grade. The effectiveness part linked to Perception was definitely the biggest bonus, as that could probably allow him to pierce a lot of veils people made to hide their levels. Finally, being able to see if people got Blessings was a nice addition.

Jake had also made it so that he pulled on the drop of blood that contained Records of the Viper quite a bit for the Blessing detection part. Jake knew how to detect if someone had a Blessing but was clueless as to what god had given the Blessing unless it was from someone he recognized. So he definitely needed system assistance for that part.

Leaning back on the sofa, Jake took a deep breath, satisfied by his results. Upgrading Identify had not been on his to-do list but doing it was definitely a welcome addition. He had even gotten some ideas as to how other alchemy skills could maybe be merged with the Viper's Legacy skills with time, but that was not something he would pursue. No, for now, he was more than happy.

All nine Legacy skills at Legendary.

That had to be considered quite the feat, right? Jake at least assumed it would have a positive influence on his upcoming evolution. Jake knew that his profession was unique, so anything he did now could result in a better version that gave more stats or maybe better skills when the time came. At least, that was his working theory.

Smiling to himself, Jake checked off the last thing that had to do with his profession before the evolution. Jake decided to pull up all his profession skills to check if he had missed something or had an obvious one he could try to upgrade.

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (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 (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)]

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There were some skills of low rarity. Purification and Cultivate Toxin were two obvious ones. However, Jake firmly believed upgrading either of these wouldn't matter much for his evolution, especially not as Jake now believed that Cultivate Toxin would one day become one with the Legacy skills.

Jake concluded that he was indeed done with his profession for the rest of D-grade. Now, it was time for his class and the goal of creating a skill of a higher rarity than Jake had ever done before.

He and sim-Jake had considered this skill a lot and quickly come to realize that they were indeed arrogant idiots who thoughts creating a mythical skill was far easier than it actually was. However, more than arrogant idiots, they were stubborn idiots who would keep working on it until it worked. But to stand any chance of creating the skill, they needed time.

Well, they needed time to not pass as fast as it tended to. If not, then Jake could see himself missing a certain Prima Guardian coming to Earth, all his friends reaching C-grade and getting well into it, and not seeing his family for too long... Shit, maybe there would be a bunch of other timed system events he would miss. Also, going missing for a bloody long time could lead to unexpected issues, especially with bastards like Ell'Hakan still around.

Besides, all Jake would need to do was sit on his ass and meditate.

Jake closed his eyes for a moment and entered his Soulspace. He saw sim-Jake stand ready, giving him a nod, affirming that he was ready.

Now the only problem was figuring out how to have time pass a little differently to not miss stuff...

"Vil-"

"Hey again," the snake god popped up right behind the couch once more, even faster than last time. "This time, I am interested in knowing what the vision showed you as it relates to Sagacity. What did you see?"

Jake was a bit surprised at the Viper seeming to actually care so much. He decided not to hide anything as he told him what he had experienced from start to end – including the First Sage recognizing him.

After Jake was done talking, the Viper was sitting in an armchair across from Jake with a hand on his chin, thinking.

"Very... interesting. But not unsurprising," Villy finally said. "It is a unique skill, so perhaps it makes sense that you can experience a Transcendence, though it does sound like you didn't truly feel its effects. I can promise you that what you went through is nothing compared to me. First of all, for me, it felt like I was in that other world for... I would say about fourteen or fifteen years? At least it felt that long to me."

"It did not feel that long to me... though it explains how you could do everything swiftly and perfectly from my point of view. But how about the fact that the First Sage saw me there? Could even see things about me? That is not normal," Jake said.

"I tend to not comment on things I have limited understanding of. The problem isn't that there is no explanation of what it means but that there are too many explanations. You peer at a Record Fragment, right? This means you cannot alter the fragments, only view them. I don't subscribe to your theory of pre-determination, but more to the theory that the world you see is the same world from back then. It is a mirror of it. If it is a simulation like the Seat of the Exalted Prima event, or maybe the skill even creates a second true universe with a split timeline or something else insane like that upon you being seen. I have no way of knowing," the Viper shook his head.

"Let me say it like this. There are other skills to see certain Records, or there have at least been prior system events where it happens. Tell me, have you ever felt someone observing you? Besides me, of course. I am talking about if you have ever felt like someone observed you the same way you observed me during your Path of the Heretic-Chosen?" the Viper asked.

"Not that I recall," Jake said with a deep frown. Yeah... Villy had a point. If Jake had been observed, he would have damn well noticed it. At least, he believed he would have. So the only explanation would be that no one had traveled back and looked at him. He saw a few reasons that could be. A: Jake never made it to godhood and was thus not worth looking at. B: He couldn't notice if they were looking at him. C: no one will ever, in the history of infinity, get a skill or anything like that to observe his past the same way Jake could with Villy.

He called bullshit on all three of those. It was way more probably that these Record-peering skills just didn't truly interfere with the past.

"You got a point. But even so, no comments on what he said? Something about my Origin... also, the way the vision ended was so weird. Like it was forcefully stopped. I didn't even feel the usual transportation out of the skill," Jake said with doubt.

"No comments indeed," Villy said. "It is your skill and your Origin. I am sure you have come across the word Origin before, so refer to that."

"Aight..." Jake relented.

He had come across the word Origin before, and he had a pretty good idea of what it was. Something to do with the core of a Truesoul or perhaps the "true essence" of stuff. Okay, Jake had to admit, he was still a bit iffy on the details.

"Now," Villy said with a teasing smile. "You said you had something else you wanted my help with before you went on a mental journey? What can I do for my dear Chosen?"

Jake was happy Villy brought him back on track as he nodded. “Yep. My simulacrum and I have been talking, and we will need some... time.”

“You are asking for a time-dilated chamber?” the Viper asked with a raised eyebrow.

“That was the plan. Why, isn’t it possible? I know you said too much time dilation can fuck you up, and I did spend a long time learning about Shroud...” Jake said, a bit deflated.

“Jake, you spent less than fifteen years in time dilation while in D-grade. That is well-below average for people like you. As long as you don’t plan on actually fighting or doing any crafting, I see no issues with it. Will it primarily be meditation?” the Viper asked.

“And a bit of light practice, maybe, but yeah, it will just be me and myself,” Jake confirmed.

“In that case, sure,” Villy shrugged. “Though I do have to point out the absurdity of asking me for a time-dilated chamber personally when the Order offers them already for its members.”

Jake... did not know that.

“Well, you know, I want the best of the best. Top of the line time chambers only,” Jake joked.

“I doubt Aeon can be arsed to come by.”

“I guess the second-best is acceptable, too,” Jake grinned. Latest content published on **novel•fire•net**

“Acceptable compliment. Wanna go right away?”

“May as well,” Jake said. “Though I have no idea how long it will take.”

“Nor do I know how much I can crank the time magic,” Villy grinned, almost a bit too giddy.

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Chapter 579: The Importance of Time

The Sword Saint sat in meditation as his inner vision materialized. He stood up and drew his sword as he began his sword meditation, his movements slow and ethereal. Each swing took several seconds, allowing even the smallest of children to avoid them, but each also held insight beyond what most could handle. The air itself parted for the blade, rather than impede it, as an odd shimmer appeared around his body.

Getting blessed by the Primordial of time benefitted Miyamoto in many ways. It had helped him upgrade his skills, allowed him to modify his Transcendence, and taught him an entirely new form of magic. Or, perhaps, revealed to him the talent he had in this school of magic.

However, he did not allow himself to get carried away. Many called him a stubborn old man, but he had truly taken the advice of Jake to heart during their duel. His sword was his essence, and he saw no purpose in adopting magic that did not fit him.

In his eyes, magic was only a way to improve his swordsmanship. An extension of what he already had. Trying to integrate time magic into his swordsmanship appeared difficult at first, but Miyamoto soon found a path. Time magic was often viewed as external magic: a manipulation of the world and others. In the arts of creation, it was used on certain items that took a long time to grow and could take the hit to Records. It was also used for time chambers and even applied to quite a few dungeons through system assistance, this being where most everyone encountered time magic on a more regular basis.

Miyamoto knew he was no mage. He truly did not believe himself talented in it. The conversations he had with Ms. Wells about formations or rituals only assured him of this fact. He already had a hard time understanding computers before the system; how was he to ever learn about these magical scripts? To him, programming had already been sorcery before, and now it had only become all the more complicated.

However, what he did understand was his own body. He also understood time, perhaps because he had experienced a lot of it. It was odd that even his Patron called him an old soul. By all measures, the Sword Saint was nothing more than a child before a Primordial, and yet he didn't feel like he was made to feel like he was a youngster.

This had befuddled him for a time, but Miyamoto soon came to have at least some insight into this. Time was, as most everyone knew, relative. The passing of time varied based on the concepts of space and movement, but also on a more personal level with how each person experienced time. As one grows older, it feels like time passes faster and faster, not because it actually does, but because of how time is perceived.

What was it called? The proportion theory the old man believed it was. The theory is that it feels like time passes faster as one grows older, resulting in each year feeling shorter than the one before, as it is a proportionally smaller period compared to your entire life. The old man could definitely attest to this, as it had felt like the last few years

before the system arrived had passed in the blink of an eye. Yet, now, with the system, it felt... different.

From conversations with his Patron, the Sword Saint came to learn that this psychological concept didn't only exist before the system. In fact, it had gotten infinitely worse not only in regard to proportion theory but also in feeling the moment itself. Many negative emotions that would result in it feeling like time passed slowly by were suppressed by Willpower, and the ever-expanding lifespan as one could grow older and older only contributed further. Retrospective time, prospective time, felt time...

If one is busy, it feels like time passes faster. If one is bored and unstimulated, any period of time would feel like it drags.

However... there were also times when one was deep in focus where it felt like time passed slower. Periods where one got more work done than expected or where one enjoyed time enough to truly focus on the moment and for every second to count. Quality time, one could call it.

What the Sword Saint had realized was that even if he was not skilled at time magic in the outside world, his body and mind were primed to be affected by it. Perhaps his old age before the system made him considered ancient by proportional standards, even if that thought was a bit insulting.

Be it what it may, one of the first things he did was not work on actually interfering with the concept of time but merely interfering with his own perception of it. To make every moment last slightly longer. From a mere psychological concept, it evolved to one that affected time itself. His own time.

That was how his newest evolution of Sword Meditation was born. A personal time chamber of the mind where he became one with his body and his sword. Every second passing for everyone else was a dozen for the old Sword Saint as every moment mattered. Every sword swing was worth remembering. He came to learn that this still counted and came with the same negative consequences as something like a time chamber, but that was acceptable. For even with these restrictions, it would serve its purpose.

Others had ambitions for C-grade and how they wanted their evolution to be. Miyamoto was no different. He had spoken to Jake a bit about their plans before the evolution, and Jake had mentioned his plans of creating a mythical skill, making the Sword Saint consider...

Why shouldn't he?

This was Jake's... third time doing time magic stuff? Yeah, it should be the third. Wait, no, there was also that time during the trial dungeon for the Order. Yeah, so four. Four wasn't that many, so this should still be fine, right?

Jake had been a bit apprehensive about doing it for a long time but realized there were more pros than cons to it. Especially if Villy said, it was okay. The thing that had worried Jake the most was the fear of his Records getting damaged or something else intangible that Jake couldn't feel or even know was happening. He seriously doubted even his overpowered instincts would warn him about that kind of self-sabotage.

Villy had teleported Jake away with him as they appeared in the same chamber Jake had gone to while practicing Shroud of the Primordial. The two of them stood in the chamber as Villy turned to Jake.

"Do you have an estimation for how long you will need?" Villy asked.

Jake scratched his chin. "No, not really. This feels like one of those things that are done when they are done and shouldn't be rushed only to end up with a shitty outcome."

Also known as doing the opposite of a big videogame release.

"Got it, but I will drag you out if it goes on too long. I have seen people fucking themselves over too many times already by getting so engrossed in a singular goal that they lose all sense of time and simply let the years pass by. Trust me, I, of all people, should know what it feels like to lose track of time," the Viper said with a less cheerful smile than usual.

"And you have my permission to toss me out if you deem it necessary," Jake nodded. He would also rather give up on the mythical skill than end up waking up to discover that a few decades had passed in Realtime.

"Great. We will do it just like last time, and I will crank the time dilation as high as it can go without negatively affecting you. Or, at least, negatively affecting you too much," the Viper explained. "Do note that movement may be a bit more challenging than usual and that manipulating external mana will be quite a bit harder than you expect."

"As I said, as long as I can meditate and do some light movements unimpeded, we are all good," Jake once more clarified.

Villy nodded. "Good luck and see you in... well, let's hope not too many years. At least from your point of view."

The snake god released some energy as many runes within the chamber activated. Jake felt like something in the environment was slightly shifting. It went fast in the beginning before Jake felt it slow down. Villy stayed in the chamber and stared at Jake, who had taken a lotus position in the middle of the chamber, ready to start meditating.

With every second, the smile of the Viper grew, and after a dozen or so more seconds, Jake began to feel his body be affected. It was as if thin needles pricked him all over,

making him grit his teeth from the uncomfortable pain. The Viper noticed and nodded as he cranked down the time dilation a tiny bit, making the feeling disappear.

Jake tried to move his hand and felt like he was underwater, though without the pressure of the water bearing down on him at all times.

“How many seconds pass in here for every second outside?” Jake asked.

“More than one, less than a trillion. I guess you will learn when you are done,” the snake god teased him one last time. “Good luck, Jake. I look forward to seeing what you and that simulacrum of yours have planned.”

With those words, Villy disappeared, though Jake could feel he still observed him. Jake felt grateful as he was still a bit apprehensive with this entire time stuff, but with a Primordial keeping an eye on him, it should be fine.

Closing his eyes, Jake entered his Soulspace. Within, sim-Jake was already waiting for him so they could begin. As for what they planned on actually doing? Well, that was a bit... complicated.

To create a mythical skill, they needed it to be both powerful and rely on high concepts. They had already agreed on one major aspect, more specifically, the fact that sim-Jake was, well, sim-Jake. A simulation of a separate version of Jake himself. This in itself was already a major thing and something it would be moronic not to leverage.

Next up was Eternal Hunger. The weapon was mythical already, proving it, too, relied on incredibly high-level concepts. Jake had done some weird shit when he created the weapon and had been a bit delirious throughout most of the crafting process, but he did know it had absorbed *a lot* of so-called Jake Juice – or Jake Records – from him. Coupled with the sheer quantity of curse energy and the ability to keep growing, it lived up to its rarity.

Throughout the past months, sim-Jake had also been feeding the weapon through its cursed beast manifestation in his Soulspace. Feeding it with his own Records. Those separate from Jake himself. Sim-Jake had fed the beast with memories that Jake did not have, experiences he never had, and all that made up sim-Jake that wasn't already identical or merged with the real Jake already. The ultimate goal? For sim-Jake to merge with the weapon, hopefully retaining some semblances of self.

Of course, for this to be possible, sim-Jake had to have more Records than the cursed weapon. This was perhaps the biggest gamble, as no one could be sure. Sim-Jake and real Jake already guessed that it would not simply spawn a cursed version of sim-Jake that was still “him” but something entirely different. One had to remember that the cursed weapon was a Sin weapon, after all. A cursed weapon that relied on a singular strong desire, and there was no way for sim-Jake to replace this, only become part of it.

This was the first aspect of the plan. For sim-Jake to merge with Eternal Hunger. This would add both conceptual and actual power to the new skill they would create. Jake was not sure how it would work exactly, considering Eternal Hunger was a weapon and the energy within it linked to a weapon. Was it even possible to create a skill relying on a specific weapon? Or would it somehow affect the weapon to make it “more” than just a weapon? Content originally comes from *novel~fire~net*

All very exciting things for sim-Jake and Jake to discover together.

The second aspect of the plan was the skill itself. With the fuel determined, they needed to know what it would actually do. First of all, it would rely on the Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra skill. That was a given. The big question was just *how* much of the skill they wanted.

Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra was a movement skill, something Jake didn’t really need that much. This desired upgraded skill would still include movement, but exactly how it would work, none of them knew quite yet. Sim-Jake had worked a lot on upgrading the skill already, and if all they wanted to do was create an ancient-rarity Shadow Vault, they could within a week’s time. But this was not what they wanted, obviously.

However, this did not mean this time working on upgrading Shadow Vault was wasted. Far from it. Through practice, sim-Jake managed to not only learn more of the skill but also align himself far more with the shadow affinity. An affinity that was quite a bit more complicated than Jake had initially expected.

The shadow affinity was heavily tied to the dark affinity, but they were not the same. The shadow affinity was a rank of concept above mere darkness. It was, to simplify, that which existed within the darkness left when the light is obscured. As if it was a second layer of reality itself. Not to be confused with a layer of space but something... different. In fact, the shadow affinity and space affinity had no concrete connection, as shadows seemed to entirely circumvent the concept.

That was why the Court of Shadows had become so powerful. They could use the shadows far more than anyone else. They learned to enter and exit the realm of shadows, allowing them to strike from anywhere at any time. Those powerful enough could travel through shadows, jumping even from planet to planet if they so desired. Of course, while shadow magic was potent, there were also restrictions.

One still had to pass through the shadow realm, as many many called it. On a 2-D scale, using regular shadows was a lot simpler, and one could avoid many things, but interacting with the real world from the shadows was near impossible.

Shadow Vault did not interact with the 2-D shadows but instead temporarily made one “attuned” to the shadow realm. One did not truly enter it, but as the description said, simply embraced the shadows to temporarily become one with them. It was a gross oversimplification of what Jake assumed to be the true Shadow Vault of Umbra.

In its true form, it was more like a mix of stealth, teleportation, and a rapid movement skill. Sim-Jake and Jake theorized that this true version would allow one to fully merge with the shadows and travel within a 3-D version of the shadow realm. How exactly this would work was a mystery, but it would no doubt be damn overpowered.

Anyway, sim-Jake had learned a lot, and they would still rely on the concepts of shadows from sim-Jake. Sim-Jake even had the idea to use the remnant-Records of what had once been his Blessing from Umbra to upgrade the skill. They still wanted to make it separate from Umbra entirely, but from how they understood the workings of the simulated world, everything sim-Jake brought with him was considered *his* Records alone. It had been his world, after all.

As for the details of this entire shadow part of the skill, Jake was still a bit unclear. On purpose too. Because the final part of the skill relied on their separateness. It relied on them not being the exact same person with the same understandings and thoughts. Yet they also needed to fully understand each other... at least when it came to fighting.

So they had reached one conclusion to make it happen.

“Are you ready?” sim-Jake asked.

“I should ask you the same,” Jake answered with a smirk.

Two katars appeared in the hands of sim-Jake. Jake himself summoned a bow as the two of them stood across from each other.

Naturally, they had concluded that the best course of action would be to fight. Fight until they could each perfectly read and mimic each other, and their two instincts harmonized. They would still take breaks for sim-Jake to keep merging with Eternal Hunger and for Jake to learn what he had to about Shadow Vault, but ninety-nine percent of their time would be spent fighting.

Both of them had infinite resources within the Soulspace. Neither had to ever rest. Neither could truly die or take damage. Both would only use the power of the current Jake, copying his stats for their duel.

“Then here I come,” sim-Jake said as he leaned forward and turned into a shadowy form.

Jake took a step and teleported back as his other self chased.

Thus began the longest fight Jake had ever had, if not the longest he would ever have.

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Chapter 580: Focus Perfected

Duskleaf appeared beside the Malefic Viper as he joined him in staring down at the young human within the time chamber.

“Did you ask me to come by simply to confuse me?” Duskleaf asked the Viper while looking down at Jake.

He had a break from assisting his Master as he could handle everything there himself for now. This had allowed Duskleaf to send his clone back to help the little elf girl catch up and make sure she stayed on top of her studies without any of his personal projects being affected. He even had time for this brief excursion to see what Jake was up to, though he, at first sight, didn’t learn much.

Though there was one thing.

“Why has he embedded the weapon in his chest?” Duskleaf asked. He saw that Jake had the weapon he had created firmly stabbed into his own chest, more accurately, into his own heart. At first, Duskleaf thought he was absorbing some of the curse energy from it directly into his body, but he felt no movements of energy.

“Good question,” his Master smiled. “Sadly, I have no bloody idea. What I do know is that what he wants to accomplish is linked to that mythical weapon of his.”

“Further strengthening his connection to a Sin weapon does not seem wise... it may influence his Path and lead him somewhere he did not intend to go,” Duskleaf disapproved.

“It will only become a problem if he allows the curse to influence him too much. Besides, from my understanding, what he is doing is more than merely strengthening the Soulbound connection,” the Malefic Viper explained.

Duskleaf looked a bit at the young man below and sighed. “How long has he been in there anyway?”

“From whose point of view?” the Viper asked.

“His.”

“I would say... about forty years, give or take?”

Duskleaf frowned. Not that long for himself, but a notable amount of time for a D-grade. "Has he-" The source of this content is novel•fire•net

"Yep. Every single goddamn second."

The old alchemist nodded. He stared at Jake and saw how he still remained focused. Not a single disturbance could be detected in his aura. There was only a sensation of serenity and focus from his Master's Chosen as he worked on his task.

Duskleaf had lived for... a while. He had many students during this time, having not taken the position of Grand Elder of the Academy in the Order just for show. Throughout the years, one learned things.

There had been heaven-sent geniuses. Individuals who had formed several legendary skills in F-grade, alchemists who had crafted as if they were three times their own level, living encyclopedias, and absolute monsters of mana control. Yet none of these had ever made it to godhood. They had made it far, they had gotten powerful and respected, but ultimately they had fallen short despite everyone saying they would no doubt ascend.

A foolish assumption on their part that they would make it. An arrogance born of talent. In some ways, Duskleaf even pitied them because geniuses tended to all run into the same problem down the road. They became impatient.

For a prodigy in magic, forming legendary skills, amazing all your peers, and showing off by killing foes in higher grades were all expected. They would be hailed and respected, but as they got stronger and stronger, things began to change.

Rather than compete with individuals that were D-grade and had trained for a century, they would meet C-grades who had lived for millennia. They would meet B-grades who had lived for tens of thousands of years. Even if this heaven-sent genius was only a few hundred years max, could he truly make up the gap fifty-thousand years of experience and practice had formed? Most couldn't.

Not to misunderstand, they were still talents. These people would catch up, becoming stronger than the old expert in a fraction of the time, but they rarely did. They got frustrated. They saw magic a mage had spent ten thousand years making and couldn't comprehend how they hadn't perfected it themselves in a decade. In a way, their talents became their downfall as they had never learned the act of patience.

Never learned to struggle. Never learned to truly focus. Never stood before what seemed like an insurmountable barrier, and rather than giving up or trying to find a way around, began to slowly and methodologically figure out a way to climb it, a single inch at a time.

Duskleaf smiled as he looked at Jake below. The young Chosen did not need to struggle. He could cruise relatively easily through these grades but chose not to. In all honesty, then Jake was not the most talented person Duskleaf had seen, far from it. He was good, definitely top-tier, but there were some true monsters nearly beyond comparison out there.

However, what set Jake apart was that his talent also seemed to include a different mindset. A mind that was able to have a singular focus on a task. He remembered hearing the assessment from the trial dungeon where Jake had gained the highest possible assessment from that part of the alchemy test. Coupled with his inability to give up once he set a goal for himself, and it truly set him apart.

It was like he loved every task set before him. As if the more challenging he found a task, the more enjoyable he would find it, and if the difficulty of a task was the mundanity of it, he would simply view overcoming his own boredom and lack of stimulation as just another challenge to beat. In a way, he truly was a born hunter, be it the hunt to kill or a hunt for success. Even if Jake was not talented, he would go far through sheer force of will.

This part of Jake reminded Duskleaf a bit of...

"I remember this one student I myself took in," the Viper spoke. "Not to mince words, but damn, did he suck. His mana control was all over the place. He took months to even figure out how to make the basic potions and even longer to properly learn how to make poisons without constantly hurting himself. Oh, and don't even get me started on rituals. The only thing he was even faintly talented in was using his alchemical flame."

The old alchemist shook his head and stroked his beard. "Master, I-"

"Man, was he a dunce. I was amazed at how bad he was, yet this idiot kept trying. Kept attempting to craft things even after failing a thousand times and kept improving himself one small step at a time. Usually, we talk about people meeting barriers in their Path, but this guy was running an obstacle course from day one. Yet he kept slowly trodding forward. Shit, he was downright crawling at times. He was just a stubborn fool who loved alchemy far too much to give up, no matter how badly he sucked at it. Though I guess he did become decent at it after spending a long enough time bashing his head into the cauldron."

The Malefic Viper looked at Duskleaf with a smile.

"Wouldn't you agree, my dear dunce of a disciple?"

Two katars clashed as the two identical men slid back, both also raising a hand and releasing a blast of energy. Simultaneously, they dodged and circled around to clash again. Every hit was blocked or dodged, both looking for an opening.

Finally, one presented itself. Both katars were aimed at the thigh of the opponent, but suddenly, both men froze as their eyes flashed yellow. The fight was paused for half a second as both disengaged from their attack, instead drawing bows, two arrows nocked and fired in unison.

The two arrows collided in mid-air, both falling to the ground where they had met. Two other arrows flew as each curved in opposite directions to not clash. Dodging them both was effortless for the two men as they switched tactics in concert.

They both stormed forward and clashed weapons as they each blocked and dodged. Rather than a fight, it looked more than choreographed dance, and in some ways, that was a more accurate description of what their bout had devolved into.

Their weapons stabbed and swiped as neither man was hit as they got closer and closer, each blow missed by mere millimeters. Then, they both swung, having their two katars impact each other hard. Both men decided to dive forward to tackle the other. Both failed as the other countered, and once more, both froze.

Two katars, each at the neck of the other. All either had to do was slightly move forward to find purchase. Yet, the first to move would also be the one to incite a response, and if everything went as it did the other times, that person would end up the loser.

"Another tie," Jake spoke.

"Nine hundred and ninety-two in a row," sim-Jake answered. "We don't need to reach a thousand."

Jake wasn't sure how long it had been, but it felt like neither had landed a decisive blow on the other for more than a year. In fact, it had been months since either had even landed a wound on the other. Trading blows had entirely stopped as both knew that committing too far to actually deal damage would result in a worse counterattack.

"This has indeed become meaningless," Jake agreed. There was nothing more to learn and nothing more to teach.

Sim-Jake and Jake had exhausted all there was to learn from the other about combat. Sim-Jake had learned to use the bow merely by observing and copying Jake, and Jake had done the same with the melee fighting style of sim-Jake.

It hurt for Jake to admit, but sim-Jake had reached the same level of archery as Jake far before Jake reached sim-Jake's skill level in melee combat. However, now, and for the last few... years? There had been no difference between them. Outside of magic, neither could do anything the other couldn't. Sim-Jake had even learned to use a few important skills of the regular Jake here and there, including Gaze.

There was no debate that the real Jake had benefitted the most from this. It had not been the initial plan, but Jake had naturally learned all there was to the fighting style. Both of them had kind of hoped to improve it together but found it impossible within the Soulspace.

Jake and sim-Jake were both the kinds of fighters who needed experience to improve. They needed actual combat. In fact, even trying to improve the style by only fighting each other could end up worsening it, as it would be adapted to fighting against someone with his Bloodline. No, they needed new opponents to improve.

Both sim-Jake and Jake looked at each other for a bit as they both knew. Both felt it.

"It's time." "It's time."

Spoken in unison, they smiled. There was nothing they could do, nothing more to learn. Sim-Jake's body already gave off a sensation reminiscent of Eternal Hunger, and the cursed beast no longer attacked sim-Jake whenever he got close, even if it did still want to eat the regular Jake.

"You finish up here and head towards the dungeon. I will finish up the final attunement progress and prepare for the final merge."

Jake smiled a bit melancholy. "I guess this is goodbye then."

No matter what happened next, sim-Jake would not be the same. Once the skill was made, and he was fully integrated with Eternal Hunger, his Records would fully join and become one with Jake's. Jake felt a bit bad seeing his other self go, even if he knew it was for the best.

In the outside world, the bone that held sim-Jake's existence had already begun to show signs of failure. Microcracks covered it entirely, and even if it remained sturdy enough and was still useful, Jake knew it was close to the end of its lifespan.

Sim-Jake staying a separate entity forever had always been impossible; they had discussed it so many times. His other self had even sped this up by giving away his memories and Records. Sim-Jake had admitted that he couldn't remember a damn thing anymore from before the system in his simulated reality - nothing aside from what Jake had seen during his vision, anyway. Even the Tutorial was just snippets here and there. His only reason for retaining an ego now was his inherent will to survive and that he had actively worked to remain separate.

But all things must come to an end.

"It does seem like that," sim-Jake nodded in response. "Though I think goodbye is a bit too strong of a word. It is more that I will change. In some ways, wasn't this what I

wanted? To evolve to something that didn't need a profession, something more than human? Being an embodiment of an ancient curse must qualify there."

"Well-argued," Jake smiled.

"Besides, aren't you afraid that I am going to pull a fast one and try to take over your body at the very last second?" sim-Jake teased.

"We both know I would see that coming," Jake teased back in response.

"And my intuition is saying it wouldn't work anyway," sim-Jake shrugged. "Now get going. We have a hydra to kill and a skill to create. And stop being so damn gloomy. If everything works out, you will *never* be completely rid of me."

"Rather than goodbye... see you around, then."

In the outside world, Jake opened his eyes. The katar in his chest disappeared as the wound healed nearly instantly. Jake stood up, feeling his body be slightly rigid from sitting down for... years? Jake didn't know how long had passed. It didn't matter right now either.

"I'm done," Jake spoke.

He felt the odd sensation from the time chamber slowly grind to a halt as his eyes opened wide. He felt dizzy, and the world started spinning. His body began hurting all over, but he gritted his teeth and tried to soldier through. Nearly fifteen minutes passed before his body had adapted, making him feel normal again, just in time for Villy to teleport in.

"I assume it has been fruitful," the god said.

"Yeah... can we talk after I am done?"

"You don't even wanna know how long you were in there? How much time passed in the real world?"

"Later. For now, please help me get to the dungeon," Jake insisted. Sim-Jake, within his Soulspace, was ready. They both were. Delaying them would only reduce their chances.

The Viper simply nodded as the two teleported away, appearing before a gate.

"Good luck," Villy said, not asking further or saying anything.

Jake nodded and placed his hand on the gate and accepted the prompt to enter. In the very next moment, he disappeared. He had been told of this combat dungeon. It was a

gauntlet of sorts with several images of old powerful members of the Order saved. The strongest of which was naturally the Lord Protector.

He had no interest in any other target.

Appearing within a hall, a projection instantly popped up in front of him.

“Welcome to the-“

Without hesitation, Jake released his aura, as well as everything that indicated his identity.

“I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper; take me to fight the Lord Protector’s image,” Jake said, having no desire or time to delay.

The projection did not even answer but merely waved its hand as Jake was teleported once more. He appeared in the same swamp as last time. In the distance, he saw his target.

Jake pulled out two items next. The bone katar and another item Jake had been saving for this occasion.

[Partly Digested Phantomshade Fang (Unique)] – A Phantomshade Fang granted by the system to the newly integrated ninety-third universe. Contains a vast amount of energy and Records that will allow any compatible beast that consumes it to grow far faster and gain magical skills and abilities related to dark and space magic. This fang is already partly digested, having only a bit of the original energy left.

He just needed its energy to stabilize the bone long enough for them to succeed while also giving sim-Jake a good boost of energy. As the energy within was already primed, Jake easily tossed the katar and fang into a cauldron and used Touch to temporarily strengthen the weapon.

It took less than ten minutes before Jake pulled out the improved katar that now had all its minor cracks filled with dark energy. The weapon wouldn’t last much longer, but it should be enough. Jake took it in his left hand as Eternal Hunger appeared in the other. The hydra in the distance noticed Jake the moment he let his aura lose and began walking towards it.

[Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption – lvl 199]

Time for a proper rematch, Jake smiled to himself as he shot forward to face the beast in melee combat.

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Chapter 581: Choice

The last time Jake had faced the hydra, it had ended in his defeat due to a timer. In this dungeon, there was no such timer and no interruptions to their battle. Jake could spend as much time as he wanted, as long as his resources allowed it.

Jake had no idea how long it would take, but inside his Soulspace, he already felt himself begin his part. Charging forward, Jake prepared to meet the hydra in battle. It still showed the same lack of intelligence as their first fight, but its power had grown significantly, as one would expect from a beast getting 39 more levels.

However, Jake had gotten even more levels and power.

The two-headed hydra turned toward him and got ready as he approached. Its instinctual knowledge was enough to identify Jake as a strong opponent, making it clearly take him seriously from the get-go. One maw snapped forward as the other waited to strike, evaluating what Jake would do.

Its massive teeth-filled mouth missed Jake as he side-stepped and jabbed one katar into its side swiftly. The blade only went five or so centimeters into the flesh as he retracted it, the scales and flesh of the hydra too durable for Jake to ignore. If he tried to really jam it in there, he even reckoned it would get stuck.

As expected, the second head descended and tried to snatch Jake up. Jake again dodged and tried to counter, but the first head swiped to the side to hit him. This forced him back as the second head lifted itself towards the sky and breathed in.

Space itself appeared to distort from the inhale, with Jake feeling the movements of massive amounts of mana. Air mana primarily. It was being extracted and absorbed in huge quantities at a time, making it look like a maelstrom had formed above the hydra. Even the clouds several kilometers up in the air were affected.

Needless to say, all this took a bit of time, giving Jake ample opportunity to move. The other head of the hydra naturally moved to stop him, and the four-legged beast even tried to stomp him with its large legs to keep him away as Jake dodged the head and got beneath. He ran quickly but managed to stab four times into the underbelly of the beast, each blow delivering a solid dose of poison from Fangs of the Malefic Viper.

Just as he got to the other side, the hydra roared with the head not inhaling. Jake felt his entire body tense up as the second head bent and aimed its maw straight at Jake.

Let me have it.

A massive sonic boom rocked the entire marsh as a bubble of pure air was released. Trees were uprooted, and Jake found himself impacted straight in the chest. Blood pooled in his mouth as he spat it out, flying through the air through a few trees that had survived. He slid to a halt as he landed on his feet, using both katars to slow himself down.

The released air had been far more potent in the beginning but was just a mild wind by now. Jake felt his ribs hurt a little from the impact earlier but still smiled. It needed to at least be this strong.

He stepped down as he teleported forward and, in only three steps, appeared in front of the hydra once more. Without hesitation, he attacked again. The beast happily responded as the two heads capable of swallowing him whole descended from above to eat him like a snack. Sadly for the hydra, such elementary attacks had no way of hitting.

Jake dodged both as he landed several stabs, the poison slowly seeping into the body of the beast. The scales were tough, and the hydra healed quickly, but it was outmatched. Jake had gotten stronger, and the level gap was severely lower than last time. He was no longer a complete idiot when it came to melee, either. In fact, he felt better than ever. A part of him had feared that only practicing with sim-Jake for so long would have made him worse against an opponent like the hydra, but that fear had been needless.

In reality, the movements and attacks of the hydra just seemed so damn inadequate. It was a beast that fought based on its instincts, making it all too predictable. In some ways, Jake was a bit disappointed. Then again, he knew he couldn't expect too much. It was common knowledge that the smarter a beast was, the more dangerous it was. If this hydra had the same level of intelligence as a human or even just the Phantomshade Panther, it would be far more frightening.

Not that Snappy had been weak when he was still a dum-dum.

Jake managed to land dozens of strikes, stabbing one of the legs several times, hoping to weaken it. He circled the large beast, making it harder for the heads to pin him down and attack him, positioning himself in such a fashion that only one head could strike at a time. Even if the hydra was dumb, it clearly was aware this was not good and changed tactics.

A massive roar was released, stunning Jake again. The hydra quickly spun and swiped Jake with its tail, sending him flying back from the impact. It did little damage to him, but it did buy the beast some time. Instantly it began shrinking, using the skill Jake was already familiar with from the first time around, and he knew this was when the true fight would begin.

Rather than try and take advantage of this slight opening, Jake let it finish. Soon, a hydra about four and a half meters tall stood before him, its gray scales now a darker shade. Jake felt its dense energy from a distance and knew it had improved this skill even more than last time, making him smile.

This time, he wasn't even the one to attack. Incredibly swiftly, the beast ran towards him, not even using a movement skill. The two heads shot forward like two snakes, the many teeth biting down on air as Jake had already teleported back. With the very next step, he teleported forward again to counter, but a leg was raised to kick Jake, forcing him to block for the very first time in the battle.

Jake did so by reflecting the blow towards the ground as one of the heads flew in from the side. Once more, he dodged but had no time to counter as he got pressed by the now far faster beast. The only chance he got was for a slicing attack, but the bone katar just slid helplessly across the thick scales. To his surprise, he also noticed that the many wounds on the hydra were nearly healed, and even the poison in its body was being rapidly consumed.

Does not seem to have gained more tricks in the last 39 levels but just upped everything it already could to a whole new level, Jake concluded. It maybe did have one more trick. Hopefully it did because Jake was also about to get a bit more serious.

A head came for Jake as his body exploded with power, Arcane Awakening activating at the safe 30%. His body was flooded with energy as he dodged the attack, landing a solid jab with Eternal Hunger. He had taken the hydra by surprise, allowing him to penetrate all the way to the handle and pull it out again in one swift motion.

Roaring in anger, the hydra spun again to hit him with its tail. Jake angled himself and pointed both weapons towards the tail as he jumped slightly. The impact sent him flying, but the momentum of the blow also made both katars penetrate the tail as if the beast had just slammed itself into two nails.

Jake barely allowed himself to fly backward before he canceled part of the momentum with a blast of mana before stepping down and teleporting to keep up his constant assault. Wanting to really push himself, Jake even boosted Arcane Awakening, using the destructive mode. His increase in all his offensive stats grew from 30 to 50% as Jake got even faster and hit even harder.

Yet the hydra kept up well. It was clearly on the back foot, but it still managed to keep Jake at bay for the most part. More concerning was that even if Jake landed blows, he wasn't doing much damage. The scales were thick and durable, making slicing attacks difficult, while the regeneration of the hydra made its wounds heal incredibly swiftly. It didn't even feel like it drained a lot of health points doing this, as the beast probably also regenerated that at an insane pace. Moreover, Jake came to discover the hydra did have one new trick...

A berserker-like effect. The more damage it took, the faster and stronger it got, but at the same time, its regeneration also sped up. This made it so that one had to not only outpace the regeneration that increased the more damaged the hydra was but also keep up this high damage output while the hydra got stronger and faster. It was indeed true the beast had few abilities, but those it had all seemed to synergize and turn baby Snappy into a true terror.

The beast and human soon got into a status quo of exchanging blows. Jake focused on what he had come there for as he finally felt himself be pushed, the occasional stunning roar and absorption blast putting him on the back foot at times. He knew that a single slip-up would end up losing him a limb to the maw of the hydra, making it all the more exciting. Jake also bit onto the fact that even if the beast had increased regeneration as it got hurt, he was also gaining momentum himself.

Moreover, he had a few other tricks up his sleeve for when the time came.

However, for now, he would simply indulge himself in the dance of death with his opponent as the ball was firmly in sim-Jake's court to begin what came next.

Inside Jake's Soulspace, sim-Jake stood in front of the massive curse beast with one hand on its head. He had his eyes closed as he also felt the battle outside and experienced everything like he was Jake himself. Because he partly was.

The hydra was powerful but simplistic. The winner was clear, especially if Jake decided to go all-out and not limit himself as he currently did. That would ruin the entire purpose of this exercise, though. Sim-Jake felt the rush of adrenaline running through his body as it ran through Jake's body outside. As he stood there, he carefully observed how Jake fought and what decisions he made.

Dodging was pure instinct with few decisions involved in it, but countering had many. In most instances of a fight, there were several choices that could be made when responding to something. Dodge, block, counter. Even while dodging, he had a few decisions to make, the standards being: side-step, reposition, disengage, or close the distance to set up something in the future.

Blocking was more limited and was only done when dodging was not an option or to potentially deflect and counter. However, by then, it may as well just be considered a full-on counter. Every counter had a myriad of methods behind them, too, though often only a few would be optimal. Adding in a bow had expanded the scope of possibilities significantly, though.

The more time passed with sim-Jake looking, the more sure he became of the Path he wanted to take. He wanted to fight. That had always been who he was. It was all he ever had. It was all he ever felt like he was good at. While he had lost all memories of who he truly was, the emotions remained... no, they had gotten stronger. Likely an aftereffect of attuning himself to a curse.

Sim-Jake had genuinely hated the world before the system. He knew that. After his parents died, he never really had any reason to not act out his inherent impulses, even if it was a world that had developed to not accept them. The world had not been made for . At least not back then.

The regular Jake also had some hate back then growing up. Had the same instinct and impulses. One to hunt and dominate. It still sometimes came through, but for the most part, he suppressed himself. He had chosen to bury it... bury it deep.

Jake's Bloodline had awakened during the Tutorial, but it was never the system that had put it to sleep. It was Jake himself who had managed to make his own Bloodline dormant. To try and soothe his family. To try and fit in and be a normal human. Naturally, he could never truly suppress who he was, and what little of the Bloodline remained only made Jake know how much he missed. How hollow the world was.

He had been a shell of himself. Sim-Jake's best way of describing Jake before the system was... depressed. Jake was walking the line between staying alive because surviving was so inherent to him and not seeing the point of life when it was so boring and mundane. Every action he made back then was so empty.

In some ways, sim-Jake understood why he never formed any good relations with others besides his family. It was only his family he ever could feel a connection to.

If sim-Jake had indulged his Bloodline and tried to find a purpose in life, Jake had suppressed his desire to ever find meaning and just tried to ride out the mundanity of the pre-system world. In some ways, they had both just waited for the system. Waited for them to finally enter a world where they could thrive. Who could blame Jake for losing himself after finally letting go and awakening his Bloodline after decades?

The sheer euphoria Jake had felt back then echoed into sim-Jake even now. Decades of pent-up instinct and desire had come rushing through his body at once, with ample targets to take it out on. The Jake of shortly after he awakened his Bloodline had been the closest he had ever been to sim-Jake since the day their Paths split when they were children. When they had made different choices...

"It's funny," sim-Jake smirked as he looked through the real Jake's eyes while talking to the cursed beast. "A single choice can mean so much. That single choice meant that I became me, and he became him. One single choice where we reacted differently to our shared instinct..." THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY **novel•fire•net**

Shaking his head, sim-Jake stared at the cursed beast. "I believe it is time. A final fight, if you may."

Sim-Jake let go of the beast as he sent a pulse into it. The beast's eyes opened wide as it roared, making the entire Soulspace shake. He simply smiled as the beast attacked,

and they fought. A brutal brawl where he didn't even use any weapons. A final moment of pure indulgence.

The two of them clashed for several minutes before sim-Jake was sent sliding back. A massive maw came towards him as the cursed beast wanted to eat him. Sim-Jake simply smiled. This had always been the plan. To become one with the beast through the one thing it did: consumption.

The giant maw descended upon him as the cursed beast consumed sim-Jake. The energies of the beast began eroding him as sim-Jake connected with the Records he had stored there. This was what most of their time had been spent on: assuring this would succeed. The two would become one, whether Eternal Hunger liked it or not. At any moment, he could still escape from within the beast. At any moment, he could suppress it. He could stop this entire process. But he didn't. He let it consume him because that was what he had chosen to do.

He had chosen how he lived, and now he had his final Path.

Because in the end, sim-Jake was nothing but the outcome of a choice. Such was his Origin, and so he would remain.

Just another choice: a shadow of what could have been.

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Chapter 582: An Eternal Shadow

Jake instantly knew. He felt the awareness of sim-Jake slowly slip away as the bone katar began to show even more cracks. At the same time, Eternal Hunger hummed with power as if it was growing by the second, actively consuming something incredibly valuable – sim-Jake himself.

Despite knowing this had always been the plan, Jake still felt a sense of sadness. It was a weird sentiment, but he felt like he had become good friends with his other self. To have him disappear like this wasn't something Jake wanted to see, but it was inevitable from the beginning.

All Jake could do was help make sure the Legacy he left behind would be worth remembering for eternity.

The hydra kept attacking Jake as he picked up the pace. He dealt more damage, made the beast faster and stronger due to the berserk effect, and truly pushed himself. He was in the zone as sim- Jake did what he had to do. After a few seconds, Jake felt the full change. A humming of sorts went through his body, and the bone weapon let out an audible crack. The very next second, it began falling apart, forcing Jake to temporarily retreat.

Pieces of the broken weapon fell towards the marsh water below but never reached it. It turned to dust that rapidly began moving towards Eternal Hunger. The black bone dust swirled and entered the cursed weapon as Jake felt it grow more powerful with every whisper of energy absorbed. Its aura underwent subtle changes, and Jake felt a connection to it unlike anything he had before. Like it had become more than a simple weapon and truly a part of him.

Then, it truly hit as an audible heartbeat sounded out from the core of his Bloodline... No... two heartbeats at the exact same time.

THUMP! *THUMP!

Knowledge, Records, Emotions. It all slammed into him like a truck. For a moment, Jake became unable to properly think and simply let his instincts take over. His body dodged through pure instincts, the hydra unable to hit him while Jake digested all that was streaming into his mind. His eyes were closed as he tried to focus, relying only on his sphere.

It was only now that Jake understood. Truly understood. Sim-Jake and Jake himself had wanted to keep parts separate for a reason. They were the same person but didn't have the same personalities. They shared one body but could make different choices - both see possibilities in combat and read an opponent through their instinct. Yet, at the same time, they perfectly understood what the other would do in any given situation.

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The hydra was upon Jake again at that moment. His eyes opened as he saw the head descend... and he made a choice. A reaction. At the same time, a second choice was made. Two possibilities were valid, and two reactions were effective. Hence both were chosen.

And both manifested.

Jake dodged backward at an incredible speed as his body took on a shadowy hue, accelerating him further. He drew his bow and released Splitting Arrow towards his foe. Simultaneously, a second shadowy Jake dodged to the side in melee range of the hydra and stabbed his katar into the leg of the beast.

Two figures spawned from one. Two possible realities manifested at once. One simulated, one true, yet both made real. At least for a moment.

The hydra responded quickly and ignored the arrows, clearly not having expected that attack. It instead focused on the one attacking its leg and promptly attacked. Both heads came for it, but this version of Jake didn't even try to dodge. One of the heads chomped down on Jake, but his body simply turned to black curse energy and disappeared – still leaving behind a deep and nasty wound.

Jake – the real one – landed on the ground shortly after as he still tried to digest the skill properly. He had felt like he had been both, yet only one. Both had been real, yet not. Frowning, he kept going. *There is more.* He wanted to test it again immediately; however, he also noticed what felt like an internal cooldown. No matter; he had time.

His opponent was still confused by what had happened as Jake retreated a bit, waiting for the skill to be ready once more.

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"That's... how does it work?" Duskleaf asked with a frown. "Their auras felt exactly the same; it took me nearly a second to properly distinguish them. And-"

"My dear disciple," Vilastromoz smirked. "Just enjoy the show for once."

A bit of time later, it was time for another go. Jake got in position before charging straight at the beast. Right as he got in front of the hydra, it tried to bite down. Once more, there were two responses. Dodging to both sides was correct. Hence both choices were made as the "real" Jake dodged to the right and his other version to the left. Both stabbed the side of the neck at the exact same time, both wielding Eternal Hunger, both using Fangs of the Malefic Viper to deliver poison, both absorbing energy through the mythical weapon.

With only one other head, the hydra had to choose. It went for the one on the right – the real Jake. He saw the attack descend... and realized that neither choice of the beast mattered. Because he could be either.

Once more, the beast only bit down on shadows as the real Jake stood on the left with his weapon in the neck of the beast. That is when he understood the second aspect.

Both are real to the rest of the world... but I only need to be the outcome of one of them.

After the second use, Jake also noticed that the cooldown had gotten slightly longer, and the mental strain was detectable. Nodding to himself, he kept up the fight. A bit later, he tried to use the skill again. One version jumped back and shot an arrow while the other stayed in melee once more, but this time Jake chose to stay as the melee combatant. The arrows fired from his second version had still hit the hydra and dealt damage too. The arrows themselves were gone with the shadow version, though, and Jake reckoned that should any arrows be in mid-air when he manifested as the other version, they would disappear.

By now, Jake was also beginning to feel the cost of the skill. Which was...

Pretty much nothing besides mental energy.

It drained a bit of mana each time, but it seemed to only really be the Shadow Vault aspect of the skill that had a cost. Not that Jake didn't know what the other version of himself consumed: it ran on pure curse energy. It used the massive pool of curse energy within Eternal Hunger to spawn his second shadowy version every time, making it highly efficient.

The only other cost was, of course, the mental energy, and in this aspect, it was a bit taxing. Especially when switching places with his other version, it took a bit out of Jake. Not that Jake complained... because he had a feeling he had only begun to figure things out.

Jake began to explore what skills his other version could use. Splitting Arrow? Worked. Gaze? Didn't work. Powershot? Not really; it didn't have enough time to charge, though it did look possible. Passive skills? All seemed to work as the shadow copied Jake himself. Could he summon scales on it? Yeah, it copied those, but it didn't do anything, as the shadow could always be destroyed in one blow. Touch of the Malefic Viper? Not enough time to channel, sadly. Things like Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter also worked, though with few practical applications. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter also worked just fine... too bad it had no time to ever summon the arrow. Ah, and of course, Arrows of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter worked.

However, more than any other active skill, one worked far better than any other:

Descending Dark Arcane Fang.

It was instant, dealt good damage, and worked tremendously well with his shadow. The shadow also used Eternal Hunger, making it even better as the weapon also benefitted from Fangs of the Malefic Viper. Oh, on that note, the shadow could cheat. It could instantly transform Eternal Hunger into a bow when it became ranged, something Jake sure as hell couldn't, as it took a long time for the weapon to change shape. Then again... the shadow was tied to Eternal Hunger, so it made sense. He estimated that "version" simply always had the bow and never transformed it, as it could only have either-or.

Jake's battle against the hydra had quickly gone from a mere fight to transforming the peak D-grade into a test subject. The fight kept dragging on, and soon it had been nearly five hours since they began. Jake repeatedly retreated and even flew into the air a few times to reset, deactivating all his boosting skills and consuming a potion to recover. The hydra naturally also recovered before their bout continued. When he had no more to tests... Jake decided to get serious and finish the fight.

For the first time, Arcane Awakening fully activated at 60% to all stats as Jake's body was flooded with power. He took out a vial of his best hemotoxin and put it on his one remaining katar. Hemotoxin was naturally chosen to impede the hydra's regeneration at least a little and increase the damage done with the many blows he inflicted. Would it work with the shadow? He sure hoped so.

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"It won't work with a crafted poison. That would delve into the concept of creation as it isn't tied to his soul. If it does somehow apply, the effect would simply stop working the moment the second version disperses, resulting in-" Duskleaf began commenting before shutting up and staring.

"I told you already, didn't I? Just enjoy the damn show," the Viper grinned.

--

The poison worked quite nicely. Jake's clone appeared with a katar also coated in poison, and Jake had feared the effect would simply stop once the copy disappeared, but no, it remained. That hammered it home... everything the clone did to affect the world became a reality.

This made him try to summon Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter and use a shadow with it already in hand, only to feel sad afterward. That didn't work, maybe because it counted as another weapon, and Eternal Hunger was the only possible one? He also tried some other consumables, like using the shadow while holding a bottle of poison to throw, but that didn't work either. The only-Eternal-Hunger-theory had gotten stronger, though he hoped it would at least work with two melee weapons once he got his second katar.

Anyway, all stuff for later. The plan had been for testing to be over, and even if he kept doing a few, that didn't mean he hadn't also upped the pressure to a new level. He had even hit with Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, dealing some serious damage.

By now, the result of the fight was already clear. The hydra was struggling, and after fighting so long, Jake had a thorough read on everything it did. It was truly predictable and did not have the intelligence to switch up its tactics.

The massive hydra was covered in wounds, and after activating the second fully-charged Arcane Charge from Mark, coupled with all the poison, it was also in serious pain and struggling to keep up. Without its berserker skill, it would already have fallen a long time ago.

Jake did encounter one issue here at the finishing line: Crossing the actual finish line. He knew the hydra was close to death; he knew it was hurt all over... but it was also more dangerous than ever. Moreover, it regenerated at an insane speed, making its

wounds heal in seconds. The only way to victory was to do a large burst of damage to finish the beast... and Jake had just the thing.

Throughout these hours and all this testing, something accumulated and built up. For hours it pooled and, with his massive Perception, pooled a lot.

It was naturally his Hunting Momentum. Would it work with his shadow? Jake really had no idea... but fuck did he hope it did.

Jake got ready as he set up the perfect opportunity. Half a minute passed as Jake kept up the status quo until, finally, a weakness displayed itself. The hydra had overextended, using both heads to try and catch him out. As it retracted both, Jake struck.

Momentum welled up from within as he charged. Right as he got close, both heads attacked again, and Jake reacted with a counter. Two heads, two targets to respond to... two reactions. Every shred of Hunting Momentum was consumed as Jake split into two, each stabbing Eternal Hunger toward one of the two necks of the hydra.

Both exploded in power as Descending Dark Arcane Fang was used, releasing a torrent of energy as both punched forward. Two heads flew into the air as one of the Jakes disappeared, and all Hunting Momentum was consumed. The two heads slammed heavily into the marsh, sending the water splashing. Jake stood ready for the hydra to do something, but it only stumbled a bit before falling over into the shallow water, joining its heads.

****You have slain [Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 196 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points*

Jake saw the notifications but didn't pay them much heed. Instead, he closed his eyes and entered his Soulspace right away. He did not know what he expected to see, and honestly? What appeared before him was in line with expectations.

Inside the Soulspace, a singular figure sat with his legs crossed. A shadowy figure with indistinguishable features, giving off an intense curse aura. Jake knew... this was sim-Jake... or was it Eternal Hunger? It was both... but...

Shaking his head, Jake finally checked the skill, its name also telling him what sim-Jake had become. The moment he saw the rarity, he looked at the shadowy figure.

“We bloody did it, mate.”

[Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)] – Two choices, two realities, a single soul. A cursed shadow born and sustained by sin. Allows to use his instincts to respond to an enemy. Allows the Eternal Shadow to use his instincts to respond to an enemy. Both reactions will manifest at once as two realities are created. Both realities are real, but can choose his own soul's reality and manifest it as such. The Eternal Shadow will experience the consequences of any reality not chosen. Upon activation of Eternal Shadow of , this skill allows both the Eternal Shadow and to embrace the shadows momentarily, vaulting in any chosen direction. Adds a large bonus to all stats dependent on the nature of the reaction while using Eternal Shadow of . Walk forth, Primal Hunter, your shadow forever eternal, waiting to strike.

The description offered little new information Jake had not already learned himself. Jake did not know what the baseline of a mythical skill was, but this felt like it hit the mark. It was probably the weirdest skill he had now, too... besides maybe Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

It was a skill that only Jake could have made and used. It relied on the concepts of the virtual world, his Bloodline, and shadows. The shadow aspect was not large, and Jake had also discovered that he didn't even have to use the Shadow Vault functionality. In fact, there was rarely a reason to when he used it to attack. The Records of Shadow Vault had simply been fodder for the creation of the skill.

Jake was also sure of one thing... this skill was just the beginning. It was a baseline for what could be. Already now, he saw so many upgrade paths. *All things in due time*, Jake thought.

Looking at the Eternal Shadow, Jake simply stared at it. He felt its attention on him, but he saw nothing he would identify as intelligence. It was a being of pure instincts but no longer the mere instinct of the chimera. It was not called the Eternal Shadow of for nothing.

Jake smiled and nodded at the Eternal Shadow, surprisingly getting a nod in response. His smile turned to a faint smirk. *Guess there is a bit more to it.*

Next, he turned his attention to everything else. The notification of something to do with a title gained, the change in Eternal Hunger, the dungeon coming to an end, and this annoying projection blabbering in the outside world about how awesome the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was.

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Chapter 583: An Even More Prodigious Prodigy

Jake reluctantly exited his Soulspace and addressed the projection first. He was inside a dungeon and wanted to avoid things turning awkward by suddenly getting teleported out or something. Opening his eyes, the projection that had been silent for a few seconds after noticing he was meditating spoke again.

“Honored Chosen, I want to congratulate you on your victory over the Lord Protector’s image. It was a marvelous display,” it praised in what Jake could only describe as an ass-licking tone.

He simply nodded at it as he looked at the corpse of the hydra. “It was a good fight.”

“It pleases me to hear the Chosen enjoyed himself. May I know if the Chosen intends to battle any of the other projections stored here?”

Jake shook his head. “No, I already know this one was the strongest. Defeating it should count as a win, right?”

“Indeed, however, defeating all projections will result in the opportunity to get even better rewards, especially if you face the five strongest,” the projection offered.

“Not interested,” Jake dismissed. He really didn’t care. It was still a D-grade dungeon, which meant the most it could offer was D-grade equipment or crafting material. Jake was at the crux of C-grade and didn’t need any of it.

“Very well. May your Path lead to the pinnacle, all by the glory of the Malefic One.”

He just nodded, not wanting to make a snark comment but just get a move on. He was teleported once more and appeared at the same entrance hall as before, a treasure chest in the center with the exit right behind him.

Congratulations! You have cleared Dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper: D-grade Legends of Old.

Dungeon shutting down in: 00:59:23

It was the fastest dungeon Jake had ever done, mainly by just skipping to the last boss right away through cheating with his status. But, hey, at least it also gave a title upgrade, so that was 1 more to all stats...

[Dungeoneer IX] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +17 all stats.

Jake looked at the treasure chest but decided to wait a bit and check everything else out first since he had an hour before he had to be out. The first thing he wanted to look at was Eternal Hunger.

[Eternal Hunger (Mythical)] – A weapon born of eternal hunger - a living sin of consumption, forever starving, forever seeking sustenance. Given form by the [Redacted] Hunter, this new myth still holds properties of its Origin as a weapon created by vampires from the core of a Chimera, allowing it to change shape and adapt to the will of its master. Origin has been further altered by [Redacted], giving birth to the Eternal Shadow of the [Redacted] Hunter. This weapon is eternally Soulbound to its creator; their souls are one and the same, making Eternal Hunger indestructible as long as the Hunter persists. Any attack made with this weapon will absorb energy from the target. Foes slain by the owner of this weapon will have their souls absorbed. Can consume absorbed souls. Take pride as you wield hunger incarnate. Enchantments: Curse of Eternal Hunger. Souldrinker. Soul Consumption. Eternal Shadow

Requirements: Soulbound

No change in name, it seemed, which kind of made sense. The description had just gotten longer, with a few more [Redacted] added in there for good measure. It also specifically mentioned the Eternal Shadow enchantment... even if it was damn weird to call it an enchantment. It also became clear that Eternal Hunger was no longer just a mere weapon. It was now tied to Jake through-and-through, even if the requirement still just called it Soulbound. Then again, Soulbound was eternal by design, so it made sense there was no reason to change it.

What had changed was the part saying it was now indestructible. Jake reckoned this did not mean unbreakable but that it could not be utterly destroyed like it could before. Destroying Soulbound weapons was damn hard, but methods did exist in the multiverse. As an example, then Jake could probably have some craftsman dismantle and “break” his cauldron if he wanted, and one also had to remember that when he had that vampire crafter improve his necklace, she was able to modify it. She could even potentially have destroyed it if she had wanted to.

Jake could also have – in theory – destroyed Eternal Hunger using his Alchemical Flame before. That would – not in theory – have released the massive amount of curse energy in a completely uncontrolled state and probably ruined the solar system or something, but now that wasn’t even an option.

He didn’t know why he felt a bit sad about that. Oh well.

Next up was something Jake kind of already knew about. He had felt it a bit during the battle, but now that he had winded down, he truly experienced the change. His stats had all grown... and the source was obvious. Jake checked the notification and was a bit surprised to see that while he hadn’t gotten a new title, one had upgraded.

[Legendary Prodigy] – A true talent standing at the pinnacle of his generation. Young yet showing promise above even the elders of yore. Due to your immense accomplishment of creating a legendary skill while still below D-grade, you have proven yourself a true legendary prodigy. +10 all stats +10% all stats.

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[Mythical Prodigy] – A genius ahead of the curve, not even the mythical eluding him. It feels as if your Path has barely begun, yet you refuse to be confined to the expectations of your station. Creating a mythical skill while below C-grade is no easy feat and the achievement of a true myth in the making. Be proud, affirmed in your Path. +100 all stats +20% all stats.

Jake read it over and smiled. In reality, it didn't matter much if it was a new title or an upgrade to his existing one: the bonus was massive, nevertheless. 90 flat points and 10% more to all stats. Actually, on second thought, not getting a second title was nice, as that meant this was now his best title, even beating out the Progenitor one, making it feel like an even bigger accomplishment.

He was fully aware of how much a title like this mattered. There was some diminishing return as these percentage titles were all additive, but it still helped tremendously and was what allowed Jake to fight things so much stronger than himself – or utterly dominate foes of the same level.

Upgrading it again did seem like an insurmountable task, though. Especially if Jake had to do it in C-grade. Shit, he didn't even know what the next rarity was yet. Either way, that was stuff to think about after he actually evolved. Who knew? Maybe his last two evolution quests would stump him?

They wouldn't. But they could. But not really.

As he was still in all the menus and stuff, Jake decided to take a good look at this full status – the last time before he made the push to C-grade.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 197]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 196]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 199]

Health Points (HP): 65841/68240

Mana Points (MP): 85010/130218

Stamina: 16859/58990

Stats

Strength: 5456

Agility: 8744

Endurance: 5899

Vitality: 6824

Toughness: 4929

Wisdom: 8334

Intelligence: 6913

Perception: 15247

Willpower: 6904

Free points: 0

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

Class Skills: [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arrow Rain (Epic)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Ancient)], [Arcane Powershot (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)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (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 (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [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 (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

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

--

There had been massive growth across the board, especially in Wisdom and Perception, partly for the same reason and partly for different ones. They shared that he had upgraded skills related to the Malefic Viper giving him stats in both, but the primary reason for the growth in Wisdom was just the sheer amount of levels he had in his profession.

Perception had grown because Jake had thrown Free Points into it without any regard and consumed as many damn elixirs as he could to push the stat further. Seeing he had over 15000 total now, it was totally worth it. It was a big number, after all, and big numbers were good.

As for the growth in skills, the profession ones were obviously no surprise, while he did have some good growth in his class skills too. A few of them were still a bit lacking, but all good things in due time. Tracking, Arcane Stealth, and Stealth Attack were his weakest by far, but Jake had confidence in upgrading them all. Well... besides maybe tracking.

He did consider trying before C-grade, but there really was no need to. Upgrading them were not vital to Jake's Path. Maybe some would argue that things like tracking and stealth were core to the "hunter" archetype, but Jake was not the type of hunter to track a target for a long time and then kill it. That was just one aspect of him. His core was that of a fighter able to hunt those more dangerous than himself, no matter the means.

Jake felt done analyzing his status and closed all the system windows, finally turning his attention to the final thing in the room. The treasure chest. It was quite ornate and impressive, making him raise an eyebrow. Without waiting further, he went over and touched it, only to see it be replaced with a new chest. Using Identify, he had to admit the reward did make sense.

[Scales of the Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption (Legendary)] – The scales of a peak D-grade Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption. These scales retained their durability even after the death of the beast and have even been improved slightly by the Records of their former owner. These scales are incredibly durable, and if they are used as armor will make the equipment near-impenetrable by physical damage. They are incredibly hard to work with. Due to their nature, these scales have very limited alchemical applications.

His earlier assessment of this reward not really mattering to him also proved true. Maybe a really skilled crafter could make these scales into C-grade equipment, but if that person was skilled enough to do that, then having them just use actual C-grade materials would be far better.

Not to misunderstand. Had Jake gotten these scales in early or mid-D-grade, he would have gone and had some armor made right away. As it was now, they were just something to sell or give to someone he knew who may want them to experiment with.

In his sphere, the projection appeared once more. Jake turned to it, prompting it to speak.

“I am aware that the Chosen likely has no need for such a reward, but it is not I who decide what is given. Nevertheless, you have my apology,” the projection bowed.

“As you said, not your fault,” Jake waved it off. “Sorry for my earlier attitude; I was in a rush. Wanted to make a mythical skill before I evolved to C-grade.”

Jake had kind of hoped to surprise the projection, but it simply nodded. “As expected of the Malefic’s Chosen. Let me congratulate you on your evolution, and may your Path lead to divinity.”

“Thanks,” Jake nodded. “I will be off then.”

The projection once more just bowed as Jake went out of the dungeon and appeared in... yeah, he had no idea where the fuck he was. Villy had swept him up and brought him away at his own request, and he now found himself in a hall. The hall was empty, but through his sphere, he saw a lot of people behind a gate leading into the hall with the dungeon entrance, all of them looking rather annoyed.

Jake wondered what was going on as a figure appeared beside him, having noticed Jake staring at the gate. “I took the liberty to seal off the dungeon a bit ago to make sure you could enter and exit without any annoying disturbances. The rabble seems displeased by this decision.”

“Understandable,” Jake muttered to the snake god. “But thanks anyway.”

Villy waved him off. “Who cares about them. Anyway, let’s get out of here.”

Jake found himself teleported again as they appeared back at his own mansion, right in the living room.

"That forced teleportation is a little unsettling, not gonna lie," Jake commented.

"People tend to find it more unsettling when I purposefully choose not to teleport a part of them. Always funny to see them freak out when I "forget" a foot," Villy snickered.

"I would think that was a joke... but I have a strong feeling it isn't."

"Nah, but I only do it when they don't know I am the one teleporting them, and honestly, I did kind of lie when I said it is always funny... it does get boring after a bit," the snake god admitted.

Jake shook his head before flopping down on the sofa, finally allowing some of the exhaustion from the dungeon to wash over him. He groaned a bit and looked at the ceiling.

"Snappy was real strong back then," Jake said. "But... simple. Limited."

"He was a bit lopsided, yes," Villy nodded. "Luckily, his C-grade evolution did him good in the intelligence department. Not that stat, the- ah, you know what I mean. Anyway, I can promise you that a level 200 Snappy would have whopped the floor with you, even with that new skill of yours."

"Any comments on the skill?" Jake asked, rather proud.

"Nope," Villy answered.

"None at all?" Jake frowned.

"Not a single one. You do you. My guesses or estimations of how exactly it works and the concepts behind it would only poison your own thoughts and conclusions. You made something that fundamentally doesn't make sense, so for others to try and make sense of it is pointless anyway. All we need to see and understand is the result, so I can at least comment on that. It is strong, but it has some flaws I already noticed, ones I assume you did too?" Villy asked.

"Yeah," Jake nodded.

"Good. I won't share what I think are weaknesses either. Again, you made a skill that is incredibly conceptually complex. All I can say is to keep it up and see where it can take you. Ah, but you did create a Soulbound weapon that seems hard to get rid of, huh? And a Sin weapon nonetheless," Villy did comment.

"Is that bad?" Jake asked, not really worried.

"No, not at all. What could possibly go wrong with eternally linking your soul with a cursed weapon? Totally safe and even recommended by nine out of ten dentists," the Viper joked.

"Damn. Better go for another cursed weapon then; that should only lead to a better result!"

"Oh yeah, for sure, because mixing curses inside of your soul is brilliance itself," Villy laughed. "In all seriousness, it is probably fine, and as odd as it seems, having a stronger connection to the Sin weapon may allow you to control it more easily. The connection with which it will try to control you is the same one you use to control it. Also, if all goes wrong, you can even modify it away from being a weapon at some point and transform it into something else. Worst case, seal it away somewhere until you get strong enough to separate it from yourself in a soul ritual."

"Think that will ever be necessary?" Jake asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. It is more likely it will just end up being a weapon you can use for a long time to come as long as you keep feeding it souls. I would fear linking a weapon to you like that impacting your Path if it was anyone else, but I have a feeling you will be fine. Speaking of Path, I assume you will be heading off back to your planet to evolve? Or do you want me to point out a nice leveling spot around here?" the Viper asked.

"I will go back to Earth," Jake nodded. "In fact, I will be going right away. I have dallied enough in D-grade, especially after my time in the time cha-"

That is when Jake remembered something. The time chamber. He had been so caught up in everything else happening he had completely forgotten. It didn't help that he hadn't visibly aged at all, even if he knew a long time had passed. Longer than his time with Shroud for sure... but... Follow current NOVELS on *novel•fire•net*

"How... how long was I in there?" Jake asked a bit nervously.

"From your point of view?" Villy asked.

"We can start with that..."

"Eh, around forty years. Congratulations, you managed to double your age by sitting still."

"Wha-" Jake said. He knew it had been long... but that long? His sense of time had completely slipped away, he could admit that, but it was still far longer than he had expected. Worse... he was now older than his damn parents. Which was just bloody weird to think about.

"And... how long in Realtime?"

Villy put on the evilest smile Jake had seen in a while. "Take a guess?"

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Chapter 584: (Mostly) Checked Off Checklist

Jake knew the question of how long he had been in time dilation was just a stupid joke, but he still thought about it seriously. The last time he had spent fourteen years or something in time dilation, and that had translated to a few months. Would it be more? Jake considered and concluded It couldn't be more than half a year, even if that would be a while.

However, he did notice one thing. His token had no new messages left behind on it. The last time he was in the time chamber, he had gotten some messages in the meantime, with the messages appearing whenever he exited. This time he hadn't gotten any. So, maybe less than three months? Forty years resulting in three months passing would be a 1-160 dilation, which seems like... a lot? Was it a lot?

Needless to say, Jake had no way to math it out. But he did have one way to find out quickly without having Villy tell him.

"How about we make a bet on if I can guess the time? Down to the hour." Jake proposed to tease the snake god in turn.

"Oh, interesting? What are we betting?" Villy answered with genuine curiosity. "Wait, I know! The loser has to wear an outfit decided by the other."

Jake seemed to consider it seriously for a few moments. "Pictures allowed?"

"Obviously."

"Hm... fine," Jake accepted.

"I am already assuming I lost, so how does my Chosen have a way to accurately determine Realtime? It tends to be annoying unless you have system timers, and I don't think you have any of those, and I already scanned the mansion for any kind of timing features on the ritual circle," the Viper asked curiously. "Then again, maybe you were bluffing."

Jake smiled as he spoke up.

"Hey, Duskleaf, how long was I in there?"

The sprout-clone of the alchemist god had been in another room, and Jake spoke loud enough for him to hear. Not that Jake doubted he would pick up what Jake said no matter how loud he spoke. As expected, the alchemy god peeked his head in.

"It was-"

"My dear disciple. Do not answer that."

Duskleaf looked confused a bit as Jake countered.

"If you tell me, you will get a picture of Villy in an outfit of your own choosing," Jake smirked, offering up the opportunity for him to decide.

"If you tell him, I will-"

"Fifty-five days, eleven hours, sixteen minutes, and... seventeen minutes now," Duskleaf cut Villy off.

Jake looked at Villy. "Fifty-five days, eleven hours, and seventeen minutes. Give or take."

"This is clearly collusion," he answered defiantly.

"You never said I couldn't ask anyone," Jake defended himself.

"Well, excuse me for not expecting my own disciple to so thoughtlessly betray me like that. My dear Duskleaf, what have I ever done to you?" Villy said in an exaggerated hurt tone.

"Left for eras after telling me to make sure the Academy didn't collapse, repeatedly refused to work with me on anything, forced me into your own projects, forced me into helping others I had no interest in, made me take up the position as Leader in the Academy, is pressuring me to give lessons at the Academy, stole a lot of the ingredients I had gathered while you were gone, proceeded to use those materials for your own goals without even asking, then tried to convince me that I had just misplaced my own ingredients despite full-well knowing I would ne-"

"Okay, so one or two things, I got it," Villy raised his hands on defense. "And, to counter, I would have used my own materials if I had any. Plus, you know I would repay you for-"

Duskleaf raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, good point. I wouldn't," the snake god shrugged. "Anyway, why the hell did I even agree to this? And shouldn't you be getting back to your little planet already, Jake?"

"This could all have been avoided if you had just given me a straight answer," Jake answered with a deadpan expression. "I would have probably already been on my way back if you had done that."

"Yeah, but then I would miss the opportunity to do a dramatic reveal of you being able to endure a time dilation around 1-265 despite still being in D-grade," Villy said in a tone making it sound like Jake should be impressed or proud.


"...I genuinely have no idea what is considered impressive; you do know that, right" Jake answered. Did 1-265 sound impressive? Sure it did, but what was the standard? Considering how time dilation was often only used for specific things like this or avoided entirely, it wasn't something he often heard people talk about. But it sounded like it was above standard, so that was nice.

"Sometimes I really forget how ignorant you can be... it is almost impressive. Most people have a hard time even reaching 1-100, while 1-200 is considered really damn good. Anything above that is for chronomancers who are specialized in time magic and have an incredible affinity for the concept. They can reach insane levels and practice often, while your resistance is only due to a few skills," Villy explained.

"I see," Jake nodded. Yeah, he didn't entirely get it. Maybe it was a bit like adapting to pressure in deep water? He did have Moment and Steady Focus, though he was not sure if Steady Focus even counted as that skill only affected his perception of time.

Turning to Duskleaf, Jake smiled. "Remember to take a picture whenever you pick out an outfit and send it... I want a nicely framed version if possible."

"This is why you're a heretic, Jake. You care more about some silly bet than the praise of your Patron. This is downright blasphemous, I tell you!" Villy said with much indignation.

"I accept such a label with honor," Jake bowed, also getting a nod of confirmation from Duskleaf. He did not know what the old alchemist was planning, but he was looking forward to it. This content belongs to *novel*  *met*

"Oh yeah, before I forget," Villy said as he tossed a crystal to Jake. "Schematics for the new ritual circle to teleport back here while piggybacking off the main formation the snake made."

"I had totally forgotten about that. Thanks!" Jake said, saying his goodbyes for real.

Having nothing more to do in the Order, Jake decided not to dally. Meira was gone for a lesson, so he couldn't say goodbye to her, and he quite frankly had no idea where Scarlett even was. He considered contacting Irin to ask about her but decided not to. Maybe being apart from Jake for a bit was a good thing? It had only been a few months anyway, and if something bad had happened, he was sure Irin would have told him anyway.

With that in mind, Jake left the Order relatively shortly after getting there. Well, in actuality, he had been there for over forty years, but thinking about time passing in time dilation only made Jake feel weird, so he didn't really count it.

His checklist of things before C-grade had been mostly finished, and there was only one point left:

Actually evolve to C-grade.

Scarlett had been worried about joining the Order from the get-go. Not about if she *could* join, but if it was okay for her to join. She didn't know anything about the Order, and she wasn't even that strong yet, plus she didn't know how to do any alchemy and, in all honesty, had no interest in the subject. She honed her own personal venom through the consumption of certain natural treasures and practice, and that was all she needed.

Getting taken to the assessment dungeon by that... woman didn't help either. Scarlett had no idea who that demoness had been and hadn't liked her at all from the very moment she saw her. She was weak, even for a C-grade, and it was clear she wasn't a fighter at all. Yet she dared act towards the Chosen like that... Scarlett didn't like it. At least she still didn't go too far, and after spending some time with her, maybe she wasn't that bad. Irin was also pretty helpful and told Scarlett a lot about the Order and gladly guided her around.

Irin had led her to a new area through many of the teleportation gates spread around until they reached a dungeon entrance with many other people.

"Due to recent events, I have gotten quite the promotion and am able to handle everything related to your enrollment personally. As you are not joining the Academy, there is not really an assessment per-se, more just a dungeon that has to be passed. Do note that this particular C-grade dungeon is capable of handling both groups or individuals, and you are free to choose how you want to be assessed. There are always individuals looking for someone to enter with, and I won't mince words: you getting a party is easy as pie with your Blessing," Irin explained.

Scarlett thought for a while. "I want to do it with a group."

She didn't know anyone in the Order, and she was still oblivious to the power level outside of her own planet. Entering with others would allow her insight into the general

power level of those wanting to join, and with Irin helping her, she could hopefully get a group of people considered above average.

An assessment that proved true less than an hour later as she stood in a full group of five. It consisted of a party of three dragonkin with rather diluted blood who were already a group before this. The last member was individual who had come alone. Scarlett and the other individual were the only beasts, the other one some kind of mammal-like beast who had taken a very hairy human form.

The group was more than happy to have Scarlett join, but as they left, Irin had given a warning.

"Take care, I am not getting good vibes from those dragonkin."

Scarlett took the warning to heart, though she was not overly worried. Their levels were all rather high, though, all firmly in mid-C-grade.

[Dragonkin – lvl 274]

[Dragonkin – lvl 277]

[Dragonkin – lvl 275]

[Venomtongue Alstmaw Alpha – lvl 297]

And finally, there was herself.

[Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake – lvl 285]

As enlightened species, the three dragonkin all had classes, with herself and the Alstmaw being beasts. This was when Scarlett encountered something unexpected she had not seen coming from the Order of the Malefic Viper – or people wanting to join it.

These three dragonkin looked down on herself and the Alstmaw, only allowing them to join because Scarlett had a Blessing and the Alstmaw was nearly at the peak of mid-C-grade, which was the highest one could be for this test dungeon. All three were clearly proud of their draconic heritage, despite their blood being so thin, their True Dragon ancestor no doubt many generations removed from all of them.

Perhaps what came next should not have come as a surprise...

The fighting in the dungeon had been too easy, according to Scarlett, and the dragonkin party happily did most of the work while forcing the Alstmaw to act as a tank and had Scarlett designated as "rear support" despite not having any support skills. She didn't even have to reveal her true form but had just stayed humanoid the entire time. When they reached the end of the dungeon, signifying they would be allowed to join, it was

time for loot distribution... which was just three items. Two natural treasures of a highly toxic nature as well as a spear of epic rarity.

"Unfortunate. We of the Grehalstrom tribe will naturally have first picks of the bounty, and it appears there is not enough for anyone, but us," the leader of the dragonkin said as he sneered at the Alstmaw before looking at Scarlett.

"Though I guess an exception can be made, and we can allow you one, snake," he said with a smile turning to Scarlett. "I will even offer you the honor of joining our group. With your Blessing, it should make things a bit easier, and my father has bothered me about taking more mistresses to sire more children, so you will-"

And that was the moment Scarlett reconsidered if going into the dungeon was a good idea. She had hoped to make a better first expression, but sometimes things just didn't pan out. The dragonkin had thought themselves powerful, not realizing one of the basic strategies of any good ambush predator. Considering what made snake's so dangerous.

Their ability to strike instantaneously and decisively.

The first one barely had time to react as Scarlett assumed her true form instantly. It was the healer, and she knew finishing off her opponent swiftly was important, hence why she went all-out right away. Surprisingly, the Alstmaw reacted only a second after her, going for one of the other two.

Scarlett injected a dose of neurotoxin into the healer, making him unable to properly react to the following dozen or so rapid bites, ripping his body to pieces. The Alstmaw turned far larger than before, looking like a bear walking on two legs with a far too large mouth. He was decently strong, but Scarlett still found him lacking.

A slaughter commenced. The three dragonkin looked astonished that the beasts had even dared to attack, and one of them even screamed for the projection in charge of the dungeon to offer assistance. Only to be met by silence and the fangs of a superior predator. The begging of the leader had been pleasant, too, as his body slowly rotted away.

After the fighting, she regarded that rather injured Alstmaw as she resumed her humanoid form. She preferred it and wanted to get used to it, even if she knew her snake form would forever be her most powerful state. The Alstmaw looked at her and the corpses. Scarlett picked up a severed limb and took a quick bite before spitting it out.

The other beast took this as a go-head as he proceeded to consume all three corpses with quite a gusto. They didn't even taste good, and Scarlett left for the exit, with the Alstmaw coming a bit later. They got a natural treasure for each of them, and a spear

none of them knew what to do with. Scarlett had got it in trade for the corpses in the end, even if she didn't really want it.

"I thank the mistress for her assistance and mercy," the Alstmaw said after they reached the exit, also back in his way too hairy humanoid form.

Despite over a week in the dungeon, no names had been exchanged, outside of those dragonkin yelling about their clan all the time. There simply had been no reason to.

"It's fine?" Scarlett said. She and the Alstmaw were not enemies, and she saw no reason to attack him.

"Does the mistress think we will still be allowed to join the Order after killing those three? The rules state killing other members of the Order isn't allowed..."

That is when Scarlett learned that she could get better at listening to things, as she came to know that the three of them had been members of the Order of the Malefic Viper for over a century already and were all three part of a small dragon clan with a B-grade True Dragon leader.

And also the day she learned how insignificant rules and some dragon family was for someone brought to the Order by the Forefather's Chosen.

Jake appeared back on Earth at the Mangrove circle. Old Grumpy was also there down a tunnel, and Jake flew by and informed him that Scarlett was still doing stuff at the Order before he headed off. He considered getting a second katar as he was about to do some hunting but decided not to. He wouldn't need it.

As for what he wanted to hunt? He considered going for the termites, but honestly, he couldn't be arsed to go into all those tunnels again after just spending so long cooped up. That frost wyvern was also out of the question as, quite frankly, Jake didn't think he could beat it.

So, Jake decided to finally explore the forest Haven was placed in the outskirts of. Properly this time. He had been interested to see what was at the core for a while, and now seemed like a perfect chance to check it out and finally tick off that final subject on his checklist.

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Chapter 585: A Whale of a Time

Jake's plans were spoiled right from the beginning. His nemesis reared its head the moment Jake returned to Haven: politics. More accurately, Jake was being asked to do political stuff in the form of going to greet a whale that had made it to the edge of the ocean quite a bit away, right at the border of where C-grades could go. It was annoying, but it appeared only Jake could "invite" C-grades into the safe areas, so he had to go himself.

Miranda, who had been waiting in his damn lodge to ambush him after being tipped off by her evil witch Patrons, filled him in on all this. It had been decided to have the Sky Whale join as the last member of the council, and from the sounds of it, there were already positive relationships with the ocean-based faction the whale led being established. So, overall, a good choice from the sound of it.

"Just to tell you, Sultan has already gone and talked to the whale about the time it arrived," she informed him.

"Sultan?" Jake said, remembering the shady merchant. He hadn't talked to the guy since before the Ell'Hakan invasion. Shit, he had barely heard about what he was up to, which was a rarity as he usually didn't keep a low profile.

"What did Sultan do during the invasion, by the way?" Jake asked Miranda. "And what about afterward?"

Miranda got a smile of pure schadenfreude. "Sultan stayed back in Haven after being contacted by members of the United City Alliance who had tried to convince him to switch sides. By the time we hid away due to the attack, he was already separated... and then Ell'Hakan got to him. From what I can gather, he never actually gave the nahoom anything, but he did help him by giving out information and willingly trading with him. After Ell'Hakan was gone and he began to realize how much he had fucked up, Sultan stayed away from you on purpose because he was afraid of what you would do, and he even tried to bribe me to put in a good word. I said yes to this request, by the way, which helped quite a bit as the city funds are doing well. On a serious note, I really don't care what he did. He told me himself that Ell'Hakan made him think that he had to trade freely with both Chosen to make it a fair fight or something and that you would even be angry if he refused, as that would lessen the challenge. Something I honestly cannot fault him for as I could see you get mad over someone making life easier for you."

"Huh," Jake said. Well, that explained why the guy had avoided Jake altogether. "So, you're good with him?"

"He has been easier to work with since then. Though it has driven him to pursue more business ventures to try and make up for the losses he suffered by giving more back to Haven, and he is also actively leveraging the new position of Haven and the council," Miranda answered. "So, he is still the same slimy merchant as before, but one who feels like he owes us a major debt. And he does not strike me as the type to not honor debts."

Jake shrugged. "I never even knew he "betrayed" me. Not even sure it was a betrayal? We just agreed that he could trade out of Haven, not that he would swear loyalty to me. So, yeah, I don't care, either."

Miranda nodded. "He will probably be relieved to hear that. Ah, but don't actually tell him; I like it when he squirms."

"I am beginning to worry about the influence of those witches," Jake muttered.

"Power brings out the worst in people," Miranda smiled in response. "Now be off. The whale has been waiting for over two weeks already. A patient monster, that one."

Jake headed off a bit after that, wondering on the way why Villy hadn't mentioned he had contacted that Karroch dude while Jake was in the time chamber. Then again, maybe the god didn't really think it important?

Getting to the ocean was also a lot easier than it used to be. Teleportation gates were now properly established once more. In fact, the new ones were better, and with the elimination of most factions on Earth, there was less red tape and more cooperation to get the network up and running as fast and efficiently as possible.

All this led to Jake making it to an ocean town within only an hour of leaving Haven. Despite having been away for nearly two months, nothing special had happened back on his home planet besides more developments in cities. Beast tides had stopped, faction wars had died down, and while there was still some unhealthy competition here and there, it was nothing outrageous.

Another thing that had improved was also his mask. The cracks were pretty much gone by now, with only a few minor fractures left on it. This meant the King was likely also close to fully healed... which also meant the Unique Lifeform was probably sitting impatiently and annoyed, waiting for Jake to get on with his evolution.

Anyway, back in the ocean town, Jake instantly noticed the buzzing crowd and armies of people moving boxes from the harbor. People holding shareable spatial storages ran back and forth and teleported away, using the surprisingly big teleportation venue.

Walking through the city, Jake only stopped once because he saw a woman selling ice cream, but otherwise made his way down to the epicenter of activity at a good pace. From afar, he saw that a long floating pier had been constructed, stretching several kilometers into the vast ocean with several large sea creatures flocking around the end of it.

When he got closer, he finally saw someone familiar. Close to the shore, a floating ship was docked with a large tent placed in front of it. Sultan was within, along with a dozen other people Jake assumed to be merchants, clearly hard at work and discussing something.

Jake decided to just walk in on them, still carrying his ice cream that didn't seem to be melting at all. Truly a marvel of magic, rivaling his newly created mythical skill.

Sultan turned and seemed ready to yell when Jake entered but instantly shut up as his eyes turned wide. "Ah... Lord Thayne... you're back."

This was the most nervous Jake had seen him, and Jake had to admit: Miranda had a point. Watching him squirm was pretty satisfying.

"I am," Jake said, menacingly taking a lick of his ice cream. "I see you are doing well for yourself. Trading with the ocean creatures relying on their leader, the Sky Whale, I assume?"

"Ah, yes, the Chosen is indeed correct," the merchant nodded. "I entertained our guest while waiting for your arrival, and-"

"And made a lot of money doing it. I don't doubt an entire faction filled with C-grade ocean-bound creatures is a good trading partner and can offer materials far better than nearly anyone else can get," Jake pointed out.

"Naturally, the new world government and the Chosen shall benefit from all this," Sultan answered, not at all disagreeing, though seeming a bit more reassured by Jake not caving his face in right away. "I believe Lord Thayne has come for the Sky Whale? He is residing on a small island about a hundred kilometers off the shore, directly ahead of the pier."

Jake looked at Sultan one final time. "We will talk later then."

He left with those words, Sultan looking a bit worried behind him. Jake didn't actually know if he would talk to Sultan again anytime soon; he just wanted to spook the guy.

After getting his priorities straight and sitting on a bench while finishing his ice cream, Jake headed off toward the island. He summoned his wings and repeatedly used One Step as he teleported across the surface of the water, quickly seeing the island in question.

It was small, only about five hundred meters in diameter, and with only a few simplistic wooden structures on it. Jake felt the aura of the C-grade in question, along with several other C-grades, as he got closer. Soon, he turned his attention to a wooden pavilion close to the shore.

There, he saw the whale of the hour, though he didn't currently look like a whale. He was a large, nearly two-and-a-half-meter-tall humanoid man-thing with blue skin and a bald head. There didn't appear to be a single trace of hair anywhere on his body, and to only call him obese would be a compliment.

[Sky Whale - ???]

The humanoid form was not super refined, but it rarely was. Scarlett was the only C-grade Jake had seen truly care that much about the Polymorph skill, as most just went for a useable form, not caring that much about aesthetics and actually looking human.

Jake flew over and landed in front of the pavilion, having the attention of the humanoid figures sitting there turn to him. There were even a few actual humans among them. More merchants, from the looks of it.

"My Lord, you have made it," the Sky Whale said as he stood up and nodded. Jake was glad he didn't bow, as that would have looked very silly.

"I apologize for the delay; I was occupied elsewhere. I take it you have already been filled in about the council?" Jake asked to make sure. This chapter is updated by novel◇*fire*◇net

"I have, and it would be an honor to join," the Sky Whale smiled. "We of the ocean also wish for a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship between ourselves and humanity going forward, as conflict will benefit neither of us."

Jake nodded and did his World Leader stuff. First, he allowed the Sky Whale to go where it pleased, also including the other C-grades in the pavilion after making sure they were all part of the whale's faction, before finally giving the Sky Whale the official title of Minister.

"I will do my utmost to live up to expectations," the whale said very politely. "My Patron and I both thank you for the magnanimous attitude you have shown toward us."

"Glad to have you aboard," Jake answered with a smile. "If there is nothing else, I shall leave you all to your matters."

"Ah, there is one thing," the Sky Whale said. "I am certain the Chosen also knows of the approaching Prima Guardian, and I have a warning... I do not think we will be able to assist the Chosen in this matter. We who have grown from Unique treasures will be unable to fight the Primas but only have the choice between joining them or not engaging at all. An innate restriction of sorts, that will apply until a victor has been decided between it and the enlightened of Earth."

Jake was a bit surprised at hearing this but just shrugged. "It shouldn't matter either way. I think we got it handled."

In fact, it was good news for Jake. Fewer people to share the fun with, leaving more for him. It also strengthened his belief in what the purpose of this Prima Guardian test was all about... it was to decide whether the planet would be controlled by the enlightened or monsters. It was common for an antagonistic relationship between these two groups,

and Earth was a bit of an outlier in that area, with monsters and humans working together.

"I will be off then," Jake said after a bit more chatter. He was a bit in a hurry, partly because he wanted that evolution and partly because he saw the gazes of the merchants all seemingly looking for an opening to take advantage of him.

The Sky Whale waved as Jake flew off back to the harbor town. A few teleports and a bit of flying later, Jake was back in Haven again. Without further delay, he headed into the forest, bow in hand. It was time for some good old hunting before he could finally evolve.

Running between the trees felt oddly nostalgic, reminding Jake of after he had just evolved to D-grade. When he thought about it further, he had barely bothered to explore this forest, the family of hawks having spent far more time in there.

Passing through the areas the monkeys had been living in didn't take long; Jake honed in on where he felt the subtle C-grade auras from the get-go. The levels of the D-grades grew the deeper in he got, as the trees also grew in height and power. The area itself infused them with far more energy there, Jake getting the feeling he soon wouldn't be able to easily break any of them.

Jake knew that while his forest had C-grades, it wasn't a major hub. It was more like the Grand Mangrove River in that it had a limited number, perhaps no more than a hundred C-grades total. It was the kind of area where a single alpha would take over the area sooner or later – if it hadn't happened already.

However, the forest was different from the Mangrove in that it didn't connect to the ocean even if it bordered the shoreline, still allowing C-grades to come and go. The strongest creatures on Earth Jake had encountered were either air or water-based monsters, and while it was possible powerful land-based ones could exist on the other continents, Jake was confident there weren't any here in his backyard.

Soon, Jake felt the environment shift, and he knew he had entered the domain of C-grades. Powerful D-grades were still in the area, most of them at or near the peak, and none of them of any interest to Jake. Making his way past all of them, Jake spread out his senses, searching for an enemy worth facing. One area gave off a stronger aura than anywhere else. In fact, Jake got the feeling there was something going on.

Activating Arcane Stealth, Jake got stealthy as he sneaked toward the center of the forest. On the way, he did see a few beasts that had barely reached C-grade, all of them, surprisingly enough, running away from where he was going. One of them did seem to spot Jake but ignored him and just kept running, making Jake all the more curious.

Flying upwards to get a good vantage point to see what was ahead, Jake soon found a good place. From there, he could barely see a clearing in between all the trees, nearly twenty kilometers away. Movement. Light. Something appeared to be on fire too.

He moved closer, realizing that whatever was going on meant they likely wouldn't pay Jake much mind. So, a few minutes later, he finally got a good look at things and... damn. It looked like Jake had stumbled in on quite the ongoing fight. Or maybe this was something that happened regularly.

On one side – with the defenders – was a tree nearly a hundred meters tall. It gave off an odd white light and looked a bit strange with a thick trunk and barely any canopy, but it gave off a powerful aura. It was dwarfed by all the other trees around it, but it was the largest of the combatants. Because, yes, it was a combatant.

[Ethgleam Mothertree – lvl ???]

A soul tree of some kind. Jake moved his eyes off the thing, feeling that merely looking at it could cause some annoying soul magic stuff. As for its level? Less than 220, but it was a decent variant. Its name Mothertree also made sense when Jake looked at its helpers.

[Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl ???]

[Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl ???]

There were only two of them, but they were huge hulking treants that were both conjuring huge balls of wood before throwing them towards their attackers.

Bears.

Big fire bears.

[Fireheart Ursine Den Mother – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine Den Protector – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

All of them were large black bears, the Den Protector and Den Mother the largest, with the normal ones about a fifth smaller. All of them were still around ten meters tall when on all fours, with the Mother and Protector sitting at around a dozen meters.

These bears were all spewing fire toward the tree, a barrier of magic blocking most while letting the treants throw out their big root balls. The more Jake looked, the more sure he became that this was not some battle to end all battles but more just the two groups each testing each other. Perhaps a regular thing they had going on.

Jake shook his head as he looked. It would be a shame for a third party to decide to mess up this beautiful balance of power, wouldn't it?

Then again, who doesn't love a good threeway?

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Chapter 586: Soul Tree & Fire Bears

While it was true Jake usually didn't like to get involved in the fights of others, he didn't really count this one. They were barely fighting but just throwing stuff at each other, accomplishing nothing. What did the bears hope for? That the big tree would run out of energy? They had a limited time to be there from the looks of it as the tree gave off a constant aura slowly wearing them down, and coupled with the thrown root balls, they could end up getting hurt unless they left at some point.

In some ways, looking at it annoyed Jake. Neither side was willing to take any risks but just tried to play it slow and safe. Suddenly it made a lot more sense why none of these beasts had managed to properly progress in C-grade with so long passing... they were slacking off.

It honestly was an excellent area for beasts. The passive mana alone would allow most to grow into C-grade if they managed to form a den and properly absorb it for long enough. The problem, as always, was the quantity of this energy. It was well-known that it was limited, and if one packed an entire group of beasts into the area and had them all absorb it, the environment would be unable to keep up. This was why singular, powerful beasts often claimed large areas for themselves to monopolize the energy allowing them to grow. The source of this energy seemed to often be a natural treasure, or maybe it simply came from the land itself, though Jake was honestly not sure. Probably a natural formation formed by a concept that appeared exclusive to the system.

The area Jake was in currently was more akin to the peak of the mountain than the Frost Wyvern was in than the vast ocean and the open skies. It was a small alcove of dense energy, but there was not enough to sustain many monsters. That was probably also why none of these monsters had grown much despite having been there since around when Jake returned from the Tutorial. They had to share the energy between too many individuals, and they didn't make up for this lack of energy by hunting for more experience points.

Okay, Jake could maybe excuse the Ethgleam Mothertree for not moving about and hunting down other beasts, but the bears were just damn cowards. Jake considered his approach as he looked at the bears, still throwing their weak attacks at the seemingly impenetrable barrier.

Should he break the barrier to spur on the bears? Attack the bears to make the tree try and take advantage of the opening? Stay and keep a look at the situation until either side decides to retreat and ambush them when they try to leave?

Or, the most fun option, rain down destruction on the entire area and create some chaos?

It naturally wasn't even a question as Jake flew up and stared down from above. Sadly, he could not do a big barrage as there were trees and stuff in the way, but he could do a bit of arrow rain.

Nocking an arrow, Jake took aim. He released it quickly before nocking another and firing it immediately. Both arrows curved around any obstacles before splitting once they had a clear line to their targets.

Neither side of the warring monsters below had expected his arrival. The bears were taken by surprise as destructive arrows exploded in the midst of them, while the tree's barrier was impacted hard by dozens of explosions too.

Both sides stopped what they were doing for a moment, neither hurt by the relatively weak attack, but the bears sure looked stunned. The tree didn't really have any facial expressions to read. Jake smiled to himself and flew below the canopy of some of the trees, his stealth disabled and his aura flaring. The attention of the many creatures below landed on him as Jake smiled.

"Ladies, gentlemen, bears, and trees. Pleased to make your acquaintance," Jake spoke, his smile deepening, knowing the monsters understood him. "Now, let's decide who gets to claim this forest as their own, once and for all."

They seemed confused for a moment before, surprisingly enough, a voice came from the large Den Mother below. "How dare a mere D-grade come here and-"

Jake activated Arcane Awakening in its destructive state, his body overflowing with arcane energy. "I didn't come for a talk but a fight."

"Human of the city on the edge, may I offer alliance of benefit?" he, even more surprisingly, heard from the tree. The telepathic message also included an explanation of some sort. It showed Jake the tree able to influence weaker beasts and monsters and allow them to give memories, showed the tree knowing of Haven, and guessed Jake was from there. Finally, the tree wanted to trade and work with humans.

He wanted to just reject both and get fighting but ended up sighing. Should he agree? A soul tree had to be helpful if it was telling the truth-

"Begone, you pathetic creature, or be consumed by the fires of-" the Den Mother spoke again, Jake making up his mind.

"Sure, but they are all mine, so don't get in my way, and if you change your mind and want to fight to the death afterward, I am up for it," Jake answered the tree as he turned his attention to the bears. He saw some of them were charging up some kind of energy to attack him, just waiting for an opening.

"I feel thee soul, powerful human; I desire no fight," the tree simply answered, having quite the Perception for a tree to get such a good read on Jake's aura and soul. Jake knew at that moment that an alliance was more than possible, as any tree with a high Perception stat had to be a good tree. It was just science.

It was only a bit disappointing, but Jake guessed the bears would have to make do. Six C-grades, two variants, and four weak beasts who had barely reached their grade. Looking down at them, he knew that the only reason they hadn't attacked yet was because of the soul tree. Perhaps they feared getting distracted with killing Jake would leave an opening. In fact, their attention was barely on him... proving these bears had shit-tier Perception and were thus bad bears.

Let's stop delaying, Jake thought as he nocked another arrow and took aim. Drawing back the string, time seemed to slow down as Steady Aim activated, and the arcane energy began to build up. The bears below seemed to finally pay him more heed as the intensity of energy grew, and the Den Mother roared as two of the Fireheart Ursines released two beams of highly condensed fire.

Jake let go of the string as Arcane Powershot barreled down. The beams of fire were utterly repelled as the arrow struck true, hitting one of the bears straight in the mouth. An explosion of energy from the Powershot alone sent the bear flying back, the attack having torn off a large part of its mouth and heavily injured its entire face. Sadly, the beast was far from dead as it quickly got up.

Now, finally, the bears paid him full attention... and reacted by performing a strategic retreat, also called running the fuck away.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Jake muttered to himself as the beasts began running. He nocked another arrow and released it, hitting one of the running bears. Flapping his wings, Jake gave chase while repeatedly firing arrows, focusing on the same C-grade he hit earlier.

Jake had really hoped for a good fight before evolving but grit his teeth as he found everything so far just annoying and insulting. At least the termites would have fought him properly, making him reconsider if those tunnels were really that bad.

Then, something happened that made Jake’s eyes shoot open. He chased the bears into a denser area of trees, forcing him to fly lower to allow him a clear line of sight. The moment he went in between two large trees, he felt a sense of danger from both sides, making him quickly step down and teleport backward. Just in time too.

Two massive explosions rocked the area he had just been in, two trees entirely consumed by flames. At the same time, six blasts of flames came towards him from the directions the bears had run, all beasts having turned around in a coordinated motion.

Once more, he was forced to dodge as the entire forest around him set ablaze from the massive attack. Jake was still flying downwards as two bears came flying towards him, their bodies both burning. It was two of the normal C-grades, but a C-grade was still a C-grade.

The first one swept its massive claw upwards as the ground was torn up from the swipe. All the rock it pulled up turned red as a torrent of lava headed towards Jake, with the second bear going straight for Jake.

It was a good attack.

Unfortunately for them...

Jake charged straight toward the bear going for him. His body turned shadowy as he punched forward, Eternal Hunger appearing in his hand. At the same time, he dodged to the side. The bear smashed into a shadowy version of Jake, the impact sending the bear flying back in a large explosion of mixed dark and fiery energy that would also have severely hurt Jake. If it had been the real him.

The Eternal Shadow dispersed as Jake moved to the side while pulling out his bow, firing a barrage of arrows, not toward the bear he had just struck, but at the four preparing another attack in the distance. All of them seemed confused by two versions of him appearing, making the bear he had aimed at not react as its already torn-up face was injured even further by six condensed explosive arrows. The source of this content is *novel*✕fire✕*net*

Below him, the second bear on the attack tried to follow up its own lava swipe but instead found itself freezing up as Jake glanced its way right at he stepped down. Jake

appeared right in front of the bear's face as he stabbed Eternal Hunger forward right into its skull.

To penetrate the skull of a C-grade while in D-grade would usually take an extremely high level of skill or an insane Strength stat... or an overpowered Mythical weapon.

The katar penetrated deep as Fangs of the Malefic Viper pumped venom into the bear. He grinned a bit at how the skull of a C-grade bear felt less durable than the scales of a peak D-grade hydra but didn't have much time to ponder on this as the bears in the distance finally seemed to realize the gravity of the situation.

Jake let go of Eternal Hunger- still embedded in the bear – as he moved around the beast to dodge its attempt to retaliate. Planting both his hands firmly on its hide, Jake began pumping in poison with Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Once more, the disadvantage of a large body was made apparent. The bear tried to get Jake off, but he easily dodged its repeated attacks as toxicity built up within the beast. It was only when the other bears arrived Jake was forced to retreat.

Eternal Hunger was still stuck in the bear even as he went away, and Jake could only grin as one of his theories had been proven correct. Fangs of the Malefic Viper made the weapon appear as if part of his Soulshape. Recent events had made the weapon far more intimate to Jake. The end result?

Fangs of the Malefic Viper remaining active despite Jake no longer physically touching the weapon. It kept on forming poison on its form like usual, though Jake did notice the constant upkeep having increased and a strain on his mental energy. Nevertheless, it was effective. Something the bear clearly noticed as it tried to get the weapon out of its brain.

It was firmly stabbed in there, and with its large paws, the bear had no way to get it out by itself, meaning it needed help. Jake was sure any of the others could tear out Eternal Hunger. If Jake let them, that is.

Jake went straight for the five other bears, who were now fully engaged in the fight. His attention was on the Den Mother and Den Protector from the beginning, as they were clearly superior variants. Cowardly variants from the looks of it, but variants nonetheless.

At close range, Jake shot several Splitting Arrows primarily to cause chaos as he allowed his wings to pump out poison mist. The bears seemed to care more about killing Jake than helping their comrade, not realizing the folly of their actions.

He easily dodged the first few bears who got close, their attacks big, powerful, showy, but so, so slow. Jake outclassed them all in Agility, no question about it, even with the boost evolving to C-grade had given the bears. In fact, Jake no doubt had more raw

stats than all of the bears. It wasn't only the stat disparity that made fighting between grades more difficult – it was as much the disparity in the effectiveness of stats. Every evolution made every stat point matter more, after all.

But this disparity was overcome as Jake engaged not one but five bears in direct combat. With Eternal Hunger preoccupied killing a bear by itself, Jake only had his bow and bare hands. Getting distance between himself and the bears would probably be best, but he wanted to keep them all occupied, so he stayed in the middle of them as he finally got the chance to apply something that had not been feasible against the hydra.

Bows were ranged weapons, yes. However, that did not make them *only* useable as range weapons. In fact, Jake had learned from his sparring with sim-Jake that an Arcane Powershot straight to the face from a few centimeters away was quite effective.

Effective versus sim-Jake... and Fireheart Ursines. A bear was blasted in the side of its belly as it was sent flying right as the Den Mother went for Jake. He stepped down and teleported over to another bear. The Den Protector came next, and Jake smirked as he grabbed the pelt of the bear he had teleported to and, to the horror of the group of beasts, swung it straight into the paw of the Den Protector, tearing off a considerable swat of flesh.

Just as he prepared to follow up, the ground beneath his feet rumbled, and Jake was forced to jump back to avoid a spout of lava from beneath. Looking to the side, he saw the bear whose face he had nearly torn off earlier with both paws on the ground, infusing it with fiery energy as it looked like red veins spread throughout the forest.

Finding openings was a challenge, but the longer the fight dragged on, the greater Jake's advantage became as he landed blows left and right. The large bears had some level of cooperation, but Jake was just too tricky of a target, and they clearly had no experience fighting someone his size. In fact, the one who had taken the most damage from their fight was the forest itself.

The flames all around him also intensified with time as it looked like the entire forest had been set aflame. Jake cared little as he knew it had little chance to spread, and besides... the fire would lose most of its energy once all the bears died.

Speaking of which, a certain bear still hadn't managed to get Eternal Hunger out of its skull. It had tried valiantly, but in the end, it was just a weak beast barely at C-grade.

****You have slain [Fireheart Ursine – lvl 203] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake smiled as the bear behind him finally collapsed from the constant poison pumping its body. With the death of the beast, its Soulspace and Soulshape also ceased to be, meaning Eternal Hunger was no longer considered inside a creature, so...

The Den Mother, enraged at Jake for killing what he assumed to be its cub, released a giant wave of flames as it shot forward to try and bite down on him. With a smirk, Jake met it head-on as Eternal Hunger was once more summoned, and his Eternal Shadow appeared to face the Den Mother as Jake dodged back and pulled out his bow to aim toward the most injured bear.

His arrows struck true as the enraged Den Mother and Den Protector both tried to desperately kill him. Explosions able to destroy minor towns began to be released as they attempted to simply destroy the entire area, hoping to catch out Jake in the midst of it.

Sadly for them, dark green scales had already covered his entire body. All the explosions managed to do was force Jake away before he landed on a flaming branch on a tree that had been burning for several minutes already, yet it still stood strong.

He stared down at the angry bears and saw the rage in their eyes. The intelligence he had seen earlier was gone, and all he now faced were monsters relying solely on their bestial instincts. Jake shook his head to himself as he decided to get fully serious, activating Arcane Awakening at max power.

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

Chapter 587: Promise of a Good Thing

A massive area of the forest burned, enough so that it would constitute a huge natural disaster in the world before the system. Yet, oddly enough, none of the tall trees had toppled, but all stood strong. Their bark burned, their leaves perhaps gone, but their trunks stood strong, and their auras of life remained powerful. A low-tier C-grade was simply not capable of destroying these trees unless they dedicated a long time and a lot of power to do so.

If this fact benefitted Jake or the bears was hard to determine, but in reality, it didn't matter. Jake would take advantage of the terrain either way. Be it a forest with nothing but massive burning pillars of wood or an empty burning field, he would still dominate.

Arrows flew around the massive trees, hitting the bears when they couldn't even see the shooter. The beasts were separated and blasted in opposite directions to spread them out so Jake could more easily kill them alone. Meanwhile, poison built up within the bodies of the bears, and Hunting Momentum built up within the body of Jake.

After the first bear died, the second fell not even ten minutes later. The third bear fifteen minutes after that, and the fourth only a few minutes after the third. Only the Den Mother and Den Protector remained, and as their children lay dead, their bodies decaying on the ground, a glimmer of sanity finally seemed to have returned to the beasts as they had stopped attacking mindlessly and teamed up.

Not that it ultimately mattered. All it did was extend the fight. Between Jake's higher mobility, his advantage in ranged combat, and his ability to easily get out of any tricky situation and even strike with Eternal Shadow, they never had a chance. They had a horrible matchup versus Jake, and once he forced them into the air from some flying combat, his advantage only grew, as clearly the bears sucked at flying.

Still, C-grades were C-grades. They did have some hidden cards and powerful skills, the most impressive of which was one Jake named Fireheart after their names. From a distance, Jake could feel the heat emanating from the two bears as their bodies heated up to insane levels, enough to turn the ground beneath their feet to lava. Their furs caught fire but clearly didn't hurt them, and the two got stronger in every way as they seemed to become one with the burning forest around them.

Giant blasts of fire and flaming tornadoes summoned with a single paw-swipe, beams of pure heat able to sear off parts of the otherwise incredibly resilient trees. They even had the ability to seemingly combust the air itself, making it blow up, lit only by a single spark released from the fur of the bears. Moreover, the heat from each bear seemed to empower the other, making it difficult to approach.

So, Jake didn't approach. He kept a distance as his arrows bombarded the two bears that tried to chase down and kill them. Explosive arrows were too unstable to reach his targets, but the bears simply couldn't destroy the stable versions.

Jake did run into one of the downsides of Eternal Shadow here. The explosions would nearly always still hit Jake, and the Eternal Shadow could barely handle taking any damage and was instantly destroyed by explosions whenever Jake tried to use it to attack. Luckily it did not get destroyed by something like the heat alone, but even any semi-direct hit would make it disperse.

As always, Jake took this fight as an opportunity to learn and improve, but after it had gone on for nearly an hour total, there really wasn't more to it, and it just became a hunt of attrition. The bears also noticed this and knew they were losing, so they resumed an earlier strategy.

They ran.

Jake chased.

Marks were on both of them as Jake hunted them down, arrows curving around the trees to find their target. The occasional Arcane Powershot blasted forward, tearing off a slab of flesh and making one of the beasts roar in pain and anger.

In the end, the Den Protector died first, unable to handle the building poison any longer. The Den Mother was stronger and held on, but in the end, it became the victim of Jake unleashing all his built-up Hunting Momentum in the form of a final Arcane Powershot with the good old Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter for a true killer finishing blow.

With them both dead, Jake flew down and landed in front of the dead Den Mother, finally checking all his notifications. He was a bit disappointed upon reading them through.

****You have slain [Fireheart Ursine Den Mother – lvl 215] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Fireheart Ursine Den Protector – lvl 211] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 197 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 198 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

****‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 198 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

He skipped the normal Fireheart Ursines’ notifications, not a single of them above level 205. Even the level of these two leader-type beasts was low. To even gain two levels from this fight was impressive enough in Jake’s mind due to how damn easy it had been. The only thing these bears had going for them was durability and some decent firepower, but they were in no way proper threats to someone like Jake. The fire had left Jake looking a little haggard, though, with his armor burnt and ruined in places and his face covered in soot.

Shaking his head, Jake deactivated Arcane Awakening, letting the period of weakness wash over him. As he waited to recover anyway, Jake extracted all the Beastcores he could and took whatever else of value he could find. He also considered looking for the den of these bears, but after some more thought, he decided to just go back to the soul tree and ask it about where the bears came from.

It did not take him long to make it back to the tree, and when he got close, he saw the barrier was still up. The treants looked to be in a dormant state, roots extending from their bulking bodies into the ground. Jake landed in front of the barrier as the tree spoke.

“The extinguishment of souls of fire felt from afar. Destroyers destroyed, I thank thee, human of the edge,” the Ethgleam Mothertree spoke in its vaguely female voice. *“Allow me gratitude, displayed.”*

The barrier in front of Jake opened up, allowing Jake to enter the domain of the soul tree. At the same time, right in front of the tree, an altar of roots grew out of the soil. On it was a glowing white orb, giving off potent energy. Some kind of natural treasure, perhaps... or was this the fruit of a soul tree? Who knew? Jake just knew there was no need to reject a good thing.

He walked up to the orb as the tree spoke once more. *“Consume to nourish, heal, improve.”*

Looking at the item offered more closely, Jake used Identify on it.

[Soulfruit of the Ethgleam Mothertree (Unique)] – The Soulfruit of an Ethgleam Mothertree. This fruit has been made with an extreme level of effort by its creator and contains incredibly potent energy capable of nourishing and improving the soul of whoever consumes it. Must be consumed within the domain of the Ethgleam Mothertree, or all effects will be lost.

Jake looked at the item for a bit and initially smiled. However, quickly his expression changed. Something was off. It was as if the words didn't fit properly in the description. As if something was wrong with it. He squinted his eyes, and it was as if a veil had been placed over the actual description.

Slowly his smile faded as the three also noticed his hesitation.

“This treasure, I offer thee, to form synergy,” the Ethgleam Mothertree said in a convincing and oddly soothing tone. *“Made with great difficulty, consumption must be soon, or opportunity lost.”*

Jake had learned enough about marketing to know when someone was trying to use FOMO – fear of missing out - marketing on him. He also knew that those who abused these sales tactics tended to be less than savory... something that was soon confirmed.

You son of a birch, Jake cursed as he focused and used Identify again.

[Soulfruit of the Ethgleam Mothertree (Unique)] – The Soulfruit of an Ethgleam Mothertree. This fruit contains incredibly potent energy capable of negatively influencing the soul of whoever consumes it. Warning, consuming this item may lead to soul damage.

It had tried to pull a fast one on Jake and make him consume an item that would deal serious damage to him. Even if it didn't kill him, it would harm Jake severely and give

the soul tree quite the opening. If it was even its plan... something Jake got a feeling it wasn't. No, he had a strong feeling this was something far worse.

"Tell me," Jake asked. "Absorbing this will merge it with my soul, right?"

"Yes, it is as such. Absorb and gain power; I shall assist," the tree answered.

"Willingly absorb a lot of foreign soul energy into me... leaving a ticking time bomb controlled by you, no doubt," Jake shot back. "What was the plan here?"

It was clear. Science had been proven wrong, and a tree that focused on Perception had turned out to be an evil scheming asshole tree. *No... it has to be Willpower-focused. That is the only explanation.*

"Unfortunate," the tree spoke as the orb exploded right in front of Jake. *"A human weakened, his soul susceptible."*

Energy invaded Jake's body as he just stayed there. He was in his state of weakness from Arcane Awakening, looked tired from fighting the bears, his armor was burnt and broken, and he looked utterly spent at a cursory glance. However, if the tree had truly possessed a proper Perception stat, it would have known appearances could be deceiving.

Behind him, the treants began to move towards him, as Jake felt the foreign soul energy worm its way into his mind. That is when Jake understood what the tree wanted. It wasn't to kill him... it was to use him. His hunch was proven correct as words materialized in the air in front of him. A contract.

"An alliance offered, life preserved, and thee walks free," the tree spoke as Jake saw the contract.

It wasn't a slave contract... but it was just as bad. It wanted Jake to bring it humans so that it could enslave and use them as vessels to grow itself. It wanted to plant seeds within their souls and spread through human bodies. In return, it would allow Jake to survive as long as he agreed to never be antagonistic to the tree again. If he refused, it would kill him then and there.

"A Path to survival given. Take it, and synergy shall-"

"No deal."

Jake's body once more exploded with Arcane Awakening, and the period of weakness was bypassed instantly. The treants behind him moved immediately, but Jake was faster and stormed forward towards the tree. At that moment, Jake's sense of danger flared, and he knew what was about to happen. An idea appeared instantly, and he acted on it.

One body became two as the Eternal Shadow materialized. Just as it did, Jake was hit by the detonation of the soul energy released by the tree that was still trying to worm its way toward Jake's soul and invade it. It sent a pulse of pure damage through Jake's body, about to tear through his blood vessels and damage his internal organs... as he switched places, taking the place of the Eternal Shadow.

His Eternal Shadow instantly dispersed as the violent wave of energy tore through it, leaving the real Jake utterly untouched and nearly right in front of the tree.

"Two?" the female voice echoed out as a katar slammed into the trunk.

It barely penetrated a few inches into the bark as dense magic stopped it, repelling Jake. A second pulse was released from the large monstrous tree, but it was met by a barrier of pure, stable mana that managed to block it.

Sadly, Jake had to disengage from his main target as the two treants were upon him. A root arm swept over and tried to grab him, forcing him to teleport away. Just as he appeared at his destination, a ball of vines was tossed his way. In mid-air, it exploded, releasing a torrent of writhing vines trying to whip him, making him step down and teleport a second time.

Both treants came for him again, and Jake saw what they wanted to do. They tried to force him away from the tree and out of the barrier it had erected. Why would they want him out when the barrier could serve to seal him in... unless...

"Leave, human, speak nay of this encounter, and thee shall-"

"Oh, come the fuck on," Jake cursed. The audacity of this birch, to tell him to just leave after all it did. Fuck no, only one of them was leaving there alive, and only Jake was capable of walking. So his response was an Arcane Powershot fired straight at the damn soul tree, kindly telling it to go fuck itself.

The tree seemed to finally realize there was no negotiation and, thankfully, decided to actually do something. In the air, white bolts of pure energy began condensing as the tree went on the offensive. Jake saw no reason to wait around but pulled out his bow and took a quick potshot at one of the treants.

Unsurprisingly the large monster failed to react in time and took an explosion to the face, making it stumble slightly. Three more arrows made it nearly fall over as Jake dodged the second treant while bombarding his first victim again.

In the center of the battlefield, the soul tree was done with its magic as thousands of shimmering bolts were fired toward him. Jake initially thought them easy to dodge but soon discovered that the tree had some level of control over them, making it a bit more tricky.

Not too tricky, mind you.

Pride of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake responded in kind. Mana gathered all around him as more than three hundred bolts of destructive arcane mana were gathered and released in an instant toward the attacks of the tree.

This did leave an opening for the treants that had both managed to close in on him, stretching their hulking arms towards Jake as they split into dozens of vines, trying to constrain or pierce through him. One of them even stomped on the ground as massive spears of wood shot up from the ground toward him.

Jake twisted in the air as he blocked one of the spears with his hand, the scale-empowered gloves easily handling the blow and allowing him to use their momentum to dodge away from both treants and the many bolts of soul magic chasing him. While in the air, Jake released several arrows toward the treants, dealing even more damage while he still had the opening. This content belongs to **novel•fire•net**

The many bolts of soul magic still chased him, and Jake stared at them for a moment before he lifted his palm. Soul magic had a lot of good things about it but also some very inherent weaknesses. Mana flowed into his palm as a massive blast of pure destructive mana was released, destroying more than fifteen-hundreds bolts in one go as the feebly-held-together soul magic bolts fell apart.

A few more powerful soul attacks were released, but Jake easily handled them, making the Mothertree show some level of adaption.

It released a pulse that was not aimed at Jake but at the two treants. White energy began to be emanated from both as their auras grew substantially. Roots even shot up from the ground and dug into the two treants, healing their wounds as the Mothertree had adopted a more supportive role after realizing its attacks wouldn't work.

Not that it would save the tree from becoming a pile of timber. Jake did need some materials for his soul poisons, and since the tree had volunteered to give him its good stuff, who was he to refuse?

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Chapter 588: Blinding Gleam + Author Note Rant

The treants had both grown significantly more powerful after the infusion of power from the Ethgleam Mothertree, making it apparent there was great synergy between them. It

did not come as a surprise considering the treants were called Ethgleam Elderbark Treants, but it was still fascinating to see how two completely separate races would end up influencing each other as such and end up becoming intimately linked.

It was good too. As that meant Jake at least got some entertainment value from the fight. The two of them barreled at him like two hulking monstrosities, a faint layer of magic protecting their bodies and a shimmer of soul magic revolving around their vine-like appendages.

One of them reformed its hand as it came to resemble a club, and it swung down hard in an attempt to squash Jake, missing as he teleported away. Soil flew everywhere from the powerful impact, and Jake felt the ground shake a bit beneath his feet where he had just stepped.

As he looked at the flying soil, he got an idea.

"You know, this will likely be my last major fight before C-grade," Jake spoke to the tree that didn't respond anymore. "Which means I should probably begin cleaning up some of the things I no longer need. Like these."

Jake teleported and waved his hand as several bottles appeared. A blast of mana sent the liquid splashing forward, all of it hitting the soil and slowly seeping into it. He repeated this as Jake began to make it rain, even throwing some of the better ones straight at the treants or soul tree.

What he was throwing was some of all the poisons he had stocked up throughout his entire time in D-grade. Jake tended to use his best first and work his way down, resulting in a stock of hundreds of bottles of poison that wasn't even that good when he was in early D-grade. It was creations he would never use anyway and would be even worse once he reached C-grade.

So he decided to do some illegal dumping to fuck up the local environment. It was completely wasteful and inefficient, and quite frankly, not even super effective... at least not right off the bat. Because all he wanted was to get some poison into the tree, something that immediately succeeded as the Mothertree absorbed energy from the soil itself and was too slow to cut off its absorption.

What poison it did absorb would be easily eliminated. If Jake allowed it to, that is. Reaching out, his hand began to glow dark green as he took hold of the poison within the tree and infused it with energy. Cultivated it using Touch.

The treants still came for him, but Jake simply threw more bottles at them. He had some leftover fungicides that they seemed to really not like, and while things like necrotic poison or hemotoxins sucked against non-flesh and blood lifeforms, it still did some damage simply due to the energy within.

With so much poison thrown out, the environment itself began to change, and the created barrier by the soul tree became a detriment. The poison vapor that rose into the air impacted it, draining mana from the soul tree's resources.

Jake soon stopped using Touch of the Malefic Viper on the tree as he found it not that effective. He was also already out of poison bottles, having thrown them all wastefully at the two treants, doing barely any damage. What it had done was distract them all long enough for Jake to get a great opportunity to get close to the tree once more and take it by surprise.

With full speed, he flew into the Ethgleam Mothertree as he infused all his Hunting Momentum built up so far into a Descending Dark Fang. He punched forward and penetrated the passive barrier of the tree, the katar digging into the bark and wood. With the barrier gone, Jake easily pushed it in all the way to the handle before he retreated, leaving the weapon in there.

What? It had worked great against the bear, so why not give it a shot again. That you could kill a tree by hammering a nail into it was common knowledge, and Jake had effectively just hammered a cursed nail into the Ethgleam Mothertree.

From a distance, he felt the influx of energy as Eternal Hunger absorbed more resources than usual. The curse seemed to really like the soul tree and drank to its heart's content. Jake made it his mission to ensure that the treants couldn't assist their boss and attacked the two treants that rapidly charged him.

The first was blasted back by a quickly charged Arcane Powershot, and the other one tried to punch Jake but found itself restrained by his gaze before he walked forward and punched it in the chest, making it fly back to its comrade.

Ouch, Jake complained as his knuckles hurt from the punch, his bones thankfully not damaged due to the gloves. Switching back to his bow, Jake pelted the two trees with even more explosive arrows as he let loose, not caring about saving resources. He really didn't have to with the constant stream of involuntary resource donations coming from the soul tree.

"What be this cursed thing!" the tree screamed in desperation from behind as Jake felt it try to push out Eternal Hunger in vain. The weapon seemed to almost entrench itself, refusing it let go as it constantly drained energy while pumping out poison from Fangs.

Jake did not bother giving it an answer as he went hard for one of the treants, arrow after arrow firing it back. They had no good ranged method of combat, allowing Jake to shoot them away faster than they could approach. It felt almost like he was playing a turret section in a video game where he repeatedly blasted them back while slowly having the damage accumulate.

These treants were dumb as bricks and just protectors of the soul tree. They were pawns made to act as its agents, so even if they were C-grade, they had no ability to adapt or formulate a proper response to an archer with highly explosive arrows. With every second his advantage grew, and-

"ENOUGH!" a scream came from behind as Jake felt a pulse wash over him. Then came the sound of wood exploding as Eternal Hunger was thrown away, the Mothertree having decided to blow up an entire section of its own trunk to get the weapon out.

"Human, choose fate, leave, or face destruction of twin souls!" the tree said in a clearly pissed-off tone.

Jake reckoned it meant twin souls in that it would go for mutual destruction. He would love to see it try.

Eternal Hunger disappeared mid-air and appeared within his Soulspace once more, ready to be summoned.

"I choose the destruction of three souls!" Jake yelled in response, naturally referring to the Mothertree and two treants. "You lost all chances of not becoming a pile of timber the moment you decided that trying to forcefully make me serve you was a good idea."

Jake had kind of expected another attempt from the Mothertree to make him leave, but it seemed to finally become a bit more decisive. It knew killing Jake was not an option unless it went all-out... and it looked like it was about to.

He was ready for an attack as he kept shooting the two treants but was surprised to see them both stop moving. Then, their bodies began glowing as Jake felt their auras surge intensely. For a moment, he believed they were going to blow themselves up and was ready to retreat, but once more, they defied expectations. The glow turned almost blinding as both treants suddenly crumbled, and two beams of light flew toward the Mothertree.

****You have slain [Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl 211] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl 210] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake got two notifications the moment this happened, as his interpretation of the "destruction of twin souls" turned out to be off. It was not talking about his and the Mothertree, but the souls of the two treants.

Turning around, the Ethgleam Mothertree was now truly gleaming. Jake regretted looking at the tree the very next moment as he felt like a hammer whacked him straight in the brain, making him all wobbly. The light before him only grew more and more

intense as soon the entire world began to turn white. With his Sphere of Perception, he knew nothing had truly changed, but he felt like he had been transported somewhere else.

He tried to move away from the tree, and while he felt like he had moved, he stood completely still in the outside world. Around him, the white void began to warp as hundreds of trees sprung up all around. Thousands of vines shot at him from all directions, far too many for Jake to evade. His foot was caught first, and then his arm. Swiftly, his entire body was covered in white glowing vines as pain went through his body.

Jake felt like he was in two places at once, the real world seen through his sphere in no way reconcilable with what all his other senses felt. It was as if his brain tried to reject reality itself and allow the vines to slowly consume him. He struggled, trying to get free, but it was impossible.

Then came the drain – one that hit his very soul. The Mothertree was consuming him, and Jake's mind kept telling him it was okay. That struggling was a waste of time and that it wasn't that bad. The vines around him slowly began entering his body, merging with it. Seeking deeper and deeper.

Was it an illusion? A mental delusion? Something in between? Jake didn't know, and his brain refused to even try to understand. Gritting his teeth, he still resisted. He began fighting back against the many vines as it became a battle of will. Pulses of destructive arcane energy went through his soul, trying to wrest off the vines. Some of them broke, but new ones grew back nearly instantly.

Jake, focusing all he could, closed his eyes and entered Serene Soul Meditation. He appeared within his Soulspace immediately and stared at the sky as his head cleared. Massive large vines surrounded the world of his Soulspace in all directions as if he was on the inside of a snow globe. While Jake was in full control of everything within... he had no influence on anything trying to crush the glass from the outside. All he could do was resist.

"This will take far too long," Jake muttered within the Soulspace as his mind jumped to the first and most strenuous approach – a direct battle of wills. While he did think he could win this, it would not be fast. No, he needed an advantage. He considered solutions, found some, and disregarded them as he just did something far simpler.

In the real world, standing in front of the Ethgleam Mothertree, a katar appeared in his hand. While he was unable to move his body, that didn't mean he was unable to do anything. With quite a bit of effort, Jake telekinetically pushed the katar towards the tree, into the large wound from before when it blew up a part of itself.

The tree was utterly occupied with its attack and failed to put up any defenses, allowing the weapon to embed itself only a few centimeters into the exposed wood. Within the white void, the vines all shuddered for a moment as Jake took advantage.

Pride of the Malefic unfolded as Jake launched a mental counterattack, taking advantage of the shock that resulted from his katar toss. The vines all weakened more, and Jake went all-out as his eyes glowed yellow. Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, not on anything specific, but simply the exposed soul of the Mothertree that was the white void.

Dozens of the trees spread throughout the white void crumbled as the vines loosened enough, and Jake roared as his body exploded with destructive arcane energy, tearing them all apart. Free to move, Jake planted both his palms on the ground as they began to glow dark green.

Pure corruption spread out from Jake like black color in water. It invaded everything, making its way up the trunk of the many trees surrounding him and rapidly had them wither and collapse.

New vines sprung from the ground, but Jake released another pulse of destructive mana, tearing them apart before they could reach him. His mind was finally clear, and he knew allowing the vines to touch him again could change that.

The white void was soon overtaken by the corruption from Touch of the Malefic Viper. The Ethgleam Mothertree seemed to realize it had failed, and in a flash of light, Jake was thrown out of the void, also getting blasted back in the real world.

Jake flew back slightly before landing on the ground and opening his eyes. The tree only shimmered with light now, signs of corruption having invaded its soul. Another weakness of this type of soul magic. While it exposed the soul of your opponent, you also had to expose yourself. Same as the Minotaur Mindchief back in the day, though a far less extreme version.

“Please-“

There was no need to listen anymore. Jake stormed forward towards the tree and punched into the handle of the katar, making it pierce deeper and create a fissure up the trunk of the tree. Jake punched again, making the weapon pierce even deeper, like a wedge. This repeated several times as he slammed it with his fists that both hurt like hell.

With the weapon firmly in there, Jake jumped back, seeing that the barrier was already gone. The tree tried to respond, but it was far too late. An Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was knocked, and Arcane Powershot was charged to its highest level as Jake invested every shred of Hunting Momentum he had.

“Cursed you be, I shall-“

The arrow flew out and struck true as it sunk into the tree, the energy of Arcane Powershot blasting off a huge part of it. The destructive energy of the arrow ravaged the Mothertree as Jake activated the Arcane Charge from Mark of the Avaricious Hunter, making the tree light up for a second.

Then, the gleam dimmed.

“Cursed!”

And turned entirely black as a blast of dark curse energy was released as a final gambit,

At least it tried to make it a blast. The dark energy barely left the trunk before a black hole appeared, seemingly from within the tree itself. It was naturally Eternal Hunger which had noticed a tasty snack being given and begun to dig in. The blast of curse energy never even got five meters from the tree before being sucked back in and consumed by Eternal Hunger.

The tree itself was already dead the moment the curse was released, the Mothertree splitting in half and falling over from releasing the energy.

****You have slain [Ethgleam Mothertree – lvl 219] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level**** The most update novels are published on ***novel~fire~net***

Jake saw the kill notification, seeing the level of the soul tree had truly been below 220. A strong variant, though, one he had underestimated. The system also agreed it had been a worthy adversary as it had rewarded him with what he had come for.

****‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 199 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 199 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

With that, Jake had reached the peak of D-grade. He also knew he had gotten his evolution quests, but before he addressed those, Jake had something far more important to deal with.

Who knew that fighting a soul tree using soul attacks could be so tiring? Jake sure didn’t.

Deactivating Arcane Awakening, Jake yawned and sat down, leaning against the broken trunk as he took a quick well-deserved nap.

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- Chapter 589: Always Has Been

Chapter 589: Always Has Been

Jake woke up with a yawn after his nap and was instantly struck by the stench. He held his nose for a moment as he looked around and saw the source of it. The ground was black and rotting, the treants already well on their way to getting decomposed by now.

With a bit of panic, Jake turned to the Ethgleam Mothertree, and luckily it still looked fine. For a moment, he was afraid he had broken the damn thing, but the wood still looked unblemished, and he felt the energy still within.

It did not take him long to locate his loot as he dug it out from within the center of the tree.

[Ethgleam Mothertree Lifecore (Ancient)] – The Lifecore of an early-tier C-grade Ethgleam Mothertree. Contains potent life energy attuned towards the soul, making it a highly suitable ingredient for any vitality-increasing potions or life and soul-based toxins. Directly consuming this Lifecore may have an adverse effect. If this Lifecore is planted and nourished adequately, regrowing the tree may be possible.

The Lifecore was a stone quite a bit bigger than Jake had anticipated. It was about the size of a human torso and looked difficult to use in alchemy simply due to its size. He would have to extract the energy and not use the core itself, that was for sure.

Looking at the description, Jake, first of all, considered if it felt longer and more substantial due to Identify and Sagacity upgrading or if this was just the expected information. Secondly, he considered the part about potentially regrowing the tree. Was it worth it to try? Maybe he could do some fancy stuff with it...

Shaking his head, he decided to just put it inside his Palate of the Malefic Viper space for now. Jake had not really had anything in there for a long period in recent times, as there wasn't really anything worth studying deeply. He did know he wanted to make better soul poisons, so maybe this core could help a bit.

On a side note, no, time dilation did not have any effect on Palate. It worked solely in Realtime, unaffected by all fancy time magic stuff.

After Jake was done eating, he decided to start a minor forest fire. He still felt dense energy from within all the wood of the tree, and rather than bring it with him by cutting up the trunks and branches into small enough pieces to transport, he decided to turn the entire thing more transportable.

Alchemical Flame activated as Jake used telekinesis to manipulate all the wood. Jake drove his fire to form a large flame and began lowering the wood down into it. It instantly caught on fire and seemed to simply disperse into nothing to the naked eye. However, Jake saw that some byproduct was made. Ash. Not a lot of it, as it looked like he had to burn around a kilo of wood just a few grams of ash, but when one considered the size of the entire tree, it was pretty damn good.

He collected the ash from the burnt tree in glass jars with a hundred grams in each. Jake noticed that the more he burned, the less ash was generated, but once he was all done, he still ended up with forty-two and a half jars of ash. Identifying it, he nodded in satisfaction.

[Ethwood Ashes (Rare)] – The ashes left behind by burnt early-tier C-grade Ethgleam Mothertree. Used in a myriad of recipes as a catalyst when the creation is related to the soul and mind. Has no effect upon direct consumption.

Jake had remembered the Forgotten Sewers dungeon and the staff he burned back then, generating Lesser Ethwood Ashes, and reckoned he could make some himself. His theory proved accurate, and he managed to walk away with not just a Lifecore but a nice extra bounty of ash he could use in alchemy.

With everything gathered up, Jake took a seat on the ground again. It seemed that he had only slept for an hour or so, and while the weakness from Arcane Awakening was mostly gone, it was still there. As he had some time to spare, Jake checked out his evolution quests. Two of them had arrived with his level-up, and he started with the class one.

Class Evolution Quest

A hunter at heart, you seek out worthy prey with avarice. While a bow is your preferred weapon, you gladly make use of any tool available to you, embracing your Legacy as a human. Yet you also deviate, willingly picking up weapons shunned by your kind, delving into and holding onto curses and realities best forgotten. Your Path is wide, rife with exploration, myriad prey fearfully awaiting their encounter with you. You have proven yourself a hunter standing at the apex more than once, and only death shall stop you from continuing to do so.

Objective: Slay ten C-grades (10/10). Slay at least one C-grade more than 15 levels above your own (1/1)

He always liked how the system was so nice and praised him every time in these descriptions. It was like a small summary of how he had gone through the grade and acknowledged some of the things he had done. Jake was surprised by it talking quite a bit about curses, though, making him slightly worried about the impact on his evolution options. It shouldn't be too bad, right?

Nah, it would be fine. His gut told him so.

That he had already completed the quest didn't come as a surprise either. He was a bit disappointed to see it didn't count above the requirements of the quests, though. Then again, all it would do was give him a nice summary, and it did make a bit more sense when it came to the Legacy of the Malefic Viper skills.

Moving on, Jake opened to see the race evolution quest.

This one Jake was actually worried about. Race quests were notorious for barring people who had struggles in their Paths from evolutions, especially those who were scatterbrained. A bit like Jake. More than that, the goal was often not apparent before you saw it. Jake could make educated guesses for class and profession and had a good idea of what he would have to do beforehand, but it was not the case with his race evolution quest.

With determination, Jake opened the description of his final quest.

Race Evolution Quest

Humanity. The enlightened race with the largest population in the multiverse, a race that can walk myriad paths, be found in all grades and at all levels of power. Be it the Path of a creator, a destroyer, or anything in between, a human can be found who has walked it. Yet you have managed to create your own Path, claiming what you desire from the Legacies of others as your own while using your unique Origin as the foundation. An unshakeable will, indomitable mind, immutable desire, and unrivaled Origin. Continue on your Path to supremacy, Primal Hunter.

Objective: N/A

First, the elephant in the room.

N/A.

Not applicable.

There were two ways that could be interpreted off the top of his head. Firstly, Jake had already fulfilled the evolution requirement, so it didn't bother showing it to him... but if that was the case, why did it show it for all prior evolution quests?

Secondly, it could mean it in a far more literal sense. That he never had any requirements from the beginning because these usual requirements simply didn't apply to him. If that was the case, why? He already knew the most likely answer... Bloodline. However, Jake had a hard time seeing the Bloodline outright cause this, as it usually didn't interfere – or wasn't allowed to interfere – with system stuff like this. Of course, this was only worth worrying about if his situation was actually abnormal.

Maybe Jake was overthinking it, and people who had sufficient Records would always just get N/A. But he had a feeling it wasn't so... and he failed to hold himself back from asking someone who had to know.

"Hey... Villy... I got a question," Jake reached out.

"Yes, you can make quite delicious drinks using Ethwood Ash. It comes out tasting a bit like-

"What is a usual objective of the race evolution quest?" Jake interrupted him and asked.

"Fine, I lied anyway; it tastes like shit. But a usual objective? I know a few of the common archetypes. There is the Find Your Path style, this one tends to be annoying, but you only get it if you have serious problems. Then there is the Affirm Your Path type, which is something people who are already doing well often get offered to reflect on their Path and properly articulate it. The third big one is Enact Your Path, where you have to do something in accordance with your Path. Pretty similar to the one before, but this one is offered to those who already know. Due to that, this one is the easiest by far and is considered the fastest and simplest of these three classics. Mind you, there are far more kinds, but these are the most common types, and most of the variants still fall under one umbrella or another," Villy explained.

"Are there those who don't get one?" Jake asked with a frown. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT novel●fire●net

"Well, yeah. Plenty doesn't need to do any race evolution quests," Villy answered nonchalantly. Just as Jake was about to breathe out in relief, the Viper continued. *"The Sylphian is one such example, as her actual grade is considered higher than she is currently at, making evolutions just a formality. Children of beings at a higher grade also dodge this requirement, which is one of the reasons it is so much easier for the True Dragon Whelp to grow to a B-grade. To summarize, they don't have any quests as they are just catching up to the grade they technically already are. You should already know this; we have talked about it before."*

"Okay... any other cases?" Jake kept asking searchingly.

"Considering your level, I assume you are not asking for a friend. There are race quests that are already completed once you get them, but this is not the same scenario. For these individuals, it is just a formality, and the objective simply says-

"Not applicable," Jake answered.

The Malefic Viper got uncharacteristically silent for a while. Several seconds passed as none of them spoke before Villy just came out and asked.

"Your objective says N/A?"

"Yep," Jake confirmed.

"And, as stupid as it sounds of me to ask, I need to confirm. Your race is human, right. Not a variant of any kind?"

"As far as I can tell, I am as human as they come. Gives the same stats and matches the descriptions in the books to the letter," Jake answered. Then he got an idea, and his eyes lit up. *"I did get that Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen skill we talked about a while back that changed my soul, together with my Bloodline, maybe that-"*

"No, that isn't how it works," the Viper shut him down. A few more seconds passed before he spoke again. *"When you evolved to D-grade, you got the choice to evolve to a Malefic Dragonkin, right?"*

"Yeah, I did, but just thinking about the option made me... wait... damn, it really is the Bloodline," Jake said with a sigh.

"Explain."

"When I was evolving to D-grade, I did have the Dragonkin evolution offered, but I felt such a visceral disgust towards the mere thought of not staying human. Stemming from my Bloodline. Thinking back, I even get the feeling something seriously bad would have happened if I had picked it," Jake explained.

Another long pause followed before the Viper spoke again.

"I want to give advice, but I truly have none. What I can do is at least give a bit of insight. Many races have a base grade that they cannot naturally be born above and that base grade for humans is D-grade. That means if two S-grade humans have a child, it will be born as a D-grade and have to evolve like anyone else going above that – sans the influx of Records from the parents making this Path easier. What I am trying to say is that not getting any evolution quest objective as a human isn't possible. There is no precedence. This makes me reconsider if you are human at all, though everything does point to that being a fact," Villy explained.

Jake knew the thing about humans being born at D-grade as long as their parents were C-grade or above. The same was true for most enlightened species, though many of them did have variants. Elves could become High Elves, for example.

However, one thing did bother him with this explanation.

"Why does it work like that?"

"Why does it work like what?" Villy asked, a bit confused.

"The grade thing. Why can the true grade of a beast or monster be at a higher grade than D from birth, but not humans? You said Sylphie won't have any race quest either, right? So why would I? Human is not an inferior race inherently to a Sylphian Hawk," Jake said confidently.

"It relates to Records of their Origin, which... huh," Villy said as he seemed to realize something. His tone became more solemn and serious as he continued. *"Okay, this conversation will end after this, and we are adding everything regarding anything with these evolutions to the list of things to never fucking talk about again, alright? This will be the last thing I add, so listen up. As you know, then beasts have different names despite their true grade varying. The Sylphian Eyas will evolve to a Juvenile Sylphian Hawk or something like that before probably becoming a fully-fledged Sylphian Hawk at B-grade. Same for Sandy, who will evolve to their true form, probably at B-grade too. Yet their names vary. The stat points they get vary. There are no inherent indications outside of the name of the race that they are not already at their true grade. I hope you understand what this means, and now let's shelve this topic. This doesn't change anything, at least not right now, so just keep going as normal and evolve. Talk to you post-evolution."*

With those words, Villy cut the connection, leaving Jake alone with his thoughts. His frown deepened as he wracked his brain, looking for an answer he kind of already knew. One he felt. In some ways, hadn't the truth been in front of his eyes all along?

Jake always had a superiority complex. He always had to try to suppress this to not turn into an utter asshole, thinking he was better than everyone else. You know, like sim-Jake, who had never been able to care about another human being in this life. Never been able to view anyone as an equal.

This did make it hard to engage with other people, especially those who weren't strong, but he had always thought he knew why. The explanation for this had always been his Bloodline, but when he thought about it... why didn't it make him feel superior to other races in the same way? He never felt the same innate sense of superiority towards Irin, Draskil, any of the hawks, or really anyone that wasn't human. He could recognize he was stronger, but it was not a purely instinctual sense of superiority.

Why was this? Again, blaming the Bloodline was easy, and it was certainly involved. Very involved, even. Superiority was a part of his Bloodline and who he was, hence the entire resistance-to-presences aspect. But it was more than that. Far more. He truly should have realized it sooner.

Jake had fucked with so many rituals and so many evolutions of other creatures and monsters throughout his life with the system so far. A child of a late E-grade and an early D-grade hawk turned into something that was rightfully a B-grade. A Sand Worm transformed into a creature even gods didn't recognize. A cursed scimitar and an old curse smashed together to form a Sin weapon with room for infinite growth.

All of this was done by injecting some of his own energy and thus Records. Yet he had never asked a fundamental question...

How had this affected Jake's own evolutionary Path?

What exactly had the Bloodline done to his own Origin?

He was human. Just... not entirely the same kind of human as everyone else. He was more. This feeling did not simply come from his inflated ego or his Bloodline but from his Origin itself. His sense of superiority had never been solely due to the Bloodline but because, when among other humans, he felt like a dragon amongst winged snakes.

Jake was just a fledgling of a higher race, still growing into his own. The thought of the potential of better race evolutions during race evolution during the selection had long been at the back of his mind. The thought that maybe he could get some superior variant of human is an appealing prospect.

Never realizing he had been such a variant all along.

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Chapter 590: A Final Act of Vanity

Complicated.

That was the word Vilastromoz would describe the situation.

He had an odd relationship with the unknown. On the one hand, the unknown was a nuisance. It represented an obstacle one potentially had to understand to continue moving forward. Yet, on the other hand, it represented a chance to learn something new. Something truly new.

After ninety-two full eras, there wasn't much new to learn about the system besides whatever new things it decided to introduce at every initiation. However, the core mechanics never change. The rules of skill rarities, the level at which you evolved, the

races and the stats they gave, the stat limits... all of these things were set. Unchangeable. Not even Transcendents or Bloodlines could touch these.

While it was never quite on the same level, the rules of evolution for the popular enlightened races were also set in stone. Not because some inherent concept meant these were theoretically unchangeable, but because they simply hadn't ever changed. Ninety-two full Eras. Throughout the history of the multiverse, they had remained stagnant. Not due to a lack of trying either.

Sanguine and the creation of the vampires was an attempt to make a better version of humans, but it ended up just creating an entirely new race. The Holy Church had tried, Valhal had tried, and every single other major faction of the multiverse had tried to create a better version of the base races at one point or another. None had ever succeeded.

The existence of High Elves had long been a point of pride for the elven race, as they were capable of being born at C-grade, a grade above all the other regular enlightened races. However, this was not a given, as it was mostly up to chance if two B-grade High Elves or above would have a regular elven child born at D-grade or a C-grade High Elf. Humans did not have any "high human" version and would always get a D-grade, no matter what.

This low base Origin of humans was also what allowed them to multiply so quickly. The higher the grade of your race – and thus the children you could produce – the harder it was to have a child. But this was all based on the grade that the child could potentially be. Two A-Grade True Dragons trying to have a child would be incredibly difficult, while two humans at S-grade could pump them out one after another as the kid would always be D-grade. It was a quantity-over-quality kind of thing. This did mean that elves had a lower rate of reproduction compared to humans, partly due to their ability to sometimes have High Elf variants and partly their longer lifespan.

Everyone knew these things. It was public knowledge, and even E-grade forces on desolate planets could manage to get this kind of information.

But...

Then there was Jake.

High Elves were born with the name of Elf, but it could be determined if they were High Elves due to some special features the kid sometimes had and magical measurements. These measurements were developed by the Altmar empire by the Autarch and the council, and relying on magic was very much unique to the elves. The point was that only an elf would know if there was a High Elf, and that was only through these means.

On the other hand, Jake was a human. Vilastromoz did not have a shadow of doubt in his mind about this... at least he didn't. Now he began to wonder. An unknown had been introduced, one of many related to his young Chosen.

This was nothing new when it came to him. From the very first moment that Vilastromoz saw Jake, he had felt the Bloodline. One thing he was confident of back then was that Jake's race had not yet changed into what it was now. It had slowly morphed, and the Viper now believed it was at the D-grade evolution he set his Path as a human in stone.

Variant humans were seen at times, but one could not pass down this variance to children. There were already so many differences between two humans due to professions and classes, so it wasn't necessary to change the race. As long as one wanted to remain human, that is.

Jake was different. He was just a higher variant of humans. Not a different human, just... more of a human. A straight-up more powerful version. A High Elf that reached maturity at a higher level than C-grade. An impossible outlier, now made possible.

Ultimately this left the question... what would this mean?

How would it affect him moving forward? Would it impact his ability to get classes and professions? Would all his human evolutions be identical to the expected? How would his ability to reproduce be affected? Humans were already the race in the multiverse the best at passing down Records due to their unique racial skills, so how would this affect the evolutions? On that note... with his Bloodline... if the major factions knew...

Vilastromoz shook his head and looked at his young Chosen currently running through a forest stalking some rodent, seemingly unbothered by what he had just revealed to the Primordial. Jake did not know what all this meant... and neither did the Viper.

They were in unexplored territory. The result could mean nothing, just that Jake would get a race with a slightly different name and ultimately be unable to reproduce other variants like himself. Or, it could be a multiverse-changing discovery that would affect every major force in existence and send waves throughout existence.

The Viper didn't know, and if he had to be honest, that was kind of exciting.

--

Jake had no idea what this realization regarding his own race truly meant. Villy refusing to talk about it more and shutting down the topic did indicate that this was way out of the ordinary and something far more impactful and important than Jake perhaps realized. But Villy also did point out that none of this mattered right now. He was like the wyvern to a True Dragon – on the same Path, but still not quite there.

All that mattered right now was to just keep going and actually evolve. Jake was confident... no, he hoped there would be no evolutions for this race this time around. Because if there wasn't one, it meant Jake was still not yet at his "intended" grade. In fact, he would prefer to just stay a "normal" human until S-grade, if possible, as dodging those race evolution quests seemed like a nice thing.

Letting out a sigh, Jake stood up and stretched a bit. The period of weakness from Arcane Awakening had fully passed by now, and Jake was back in near-top condition. Still a bit low on stamina and mana, but nothing major. Nothing that would impact what he would do next.

He also wasn't surprised this time by still needing another race level to evolve. A part of him had hoped the Ethgleam Mothertree and treants would have just given him two levels total so he could evolve right away, but on the other hand, this was fine too as it allowed Jake to attempt another of his vain goals of D-grade. One he assumed wouldn't actually mean anything when it came to evolutions of his Path, but that he just wanted to do this for his own vanity.

It was naturally to one-shot a C-grade.

With all his skills, it should be enough if he found a weak one. Hence, he went looking. On the way to the center of the forest, Jake had run by many C-grades, a lot of them barely having reached their current level of power.

Jake took flight and scanned the forest with his senses, even using a bit of tracking to find prey worth taking down. He came across two pretty quickly, one of them a large beetle with a resilient exoskeleton, and the other a beast Jake did not quite recognize, but it had a shell of some kind covering its back. Both of them were big and lumbering monsters, meaning they had high vitality and toughness. Bad targets, so he moved on.

It was only when he found the fourth C-grade that his eyes lit up. It was a smallish rabbit-like creature with wings and small antlers that he saw jump through the forest down below. It was incredibly fast and seemed to be hunting peak D-grades for itself. It struck with insane speed and slammed its oversized feet into its prey, releasing a shockwave that sent them blasting back. Based on his estimates, there was some sound-based concept in there, turning the inside of its target into mush.

At least it would have if the rabbit was strong enough. The peak D-grade it had targeted was a large wolf that managed to get up and fight back for a good while before finally succumbing to repeated attacks from a far faster foe. It did manage to land one good swipe, drawing blood. Jake was certain after seeing this exchange that what he was looking at was a bottom-tier C-grade with shitty defenses.

[Sonic-Springfoot Wolpertinger - ???]

It also didn't have good Perception as it failed to notice Jake setting up on it. He observed the rabbit for nearly an hour as he stalked it around, waiting for it to calm down and rest. It hunted a few peak D-grades, consuming their beast cores once it killed them. The one time it did encounter another C-grade, it ran away, easily escaping with its superior speed.

As he observed, Hunting Momentum slowly built up, and Jake learned more and more about the beast. He didn't really have to learn much, as mammals like this were very familiar to him. An Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter condensed within his quiver as he continued his observation.

Even if the beast killed a few weaker beasts than itself, it even ended up running from a peak D-grade it didn't feel confident against. Jake guessed the rabbit had either eaten something really good to reach its grade or that it had been good enough at hiding and surviving while running away until it managed to evolve while staying in the outskirts of the C-grade area.

His theory that it was good at hiding was proven half an hour later as the rabbit rapidly climbed up a tree, going far up, forcing Jake to also reposition to make sure he was not spotted while still having a line of sight. Even then, Mark was on it, so the little bastard couldn't escape.

It ended up climbing more than halfway up the entire length of the tree, far enough up for several thick-leafed branches to appear. The rabbit made its way onto one of these branches and hunkered down. Jake did not feel any magic move, but he clearly saw something happen as the rabbit seemed to completely melt away, becoming one with the tree.

Camouflage.

Jake could still focus and spot it, but it took some effort. He was certain that the rabbit indeed had some kind of high-level camouflage skill, a bit reminiscent of Jake's own Arcane Stealth. The rabbit's version was way better, though, and without Jake's high Perception, he would not have seen through it. With its high speed and ability to hide, Jake could understand how it managed to stay alive this far. It was a tricky bastard. Based on how it was sitting, Jake also got the feeling it was ready to strike at any point if anything got too close, and he could even imagine it jumping for something moving on the ground far below to descend like a meteor and smash them into pieces.

So, the C-grade did have some things going for it. However, it was still a weak C-grade that was a prime subject for Jake's desire to prove he still had it - it being the ability to kill something an entire grade above himself in one shot.

His best fast-acting necrotic poison, an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, Arcane Powershot, Hunting Momentum, Bonus from Big Game Hunter, and extra damage

added by his archery skill. To truly make sure Jake would succeed, he even tried to optimize the extra damage from attacking at a long range.

Oh, and of course, Stealth Attack.

Jake flew far up into the air, as far as he could possibly go, while still allowing him a clear line of sight. Mark allowed him to know where the rabbit was even if the camouflage could fool his insane Perception from that far up in the air.

The creature was utterly still and did not look like it wanted to move anytime soon, as it was probably busy digesting all the cores it had gathered. Jake had flown nearly a hundred kilometers up in the air at his point, but he sadly couldn't go any further. He would have to shoot at a small angle due to the tree the rabbit was on, meaning he couldn't shoot straight down like with the Unique Lifeform he had slain with the Fallen King.

Once he found a good position, Jake began to prepare. He took out the massive Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, coated it in his poison, and nocked it on the string. Slowly, he drew back the string as he slowly breathed, relying on old exercises that truly no longer mattered with the system now a thing. At least he didn't think it mattered.

Arcane magic began to revolve around him as it entered the bow and arrow. His muscles were infused with energy, and Arcane Awakening activated at full power to empower him further. Slowly, he began to charge the shot. From practice, he learned that starting slowly allowed him to reach a higher peak as his body and weapon could slowly acclimate to the energy that way.

Seconds ticked by. Ten seconds, fifteen, twenty. Ever-so-slowly the amount of arcane energy grew as Jake kept steadily breathing in and out. The air around him began to shudder, faint cracking sounds were heard from who-knows-where, and the entire environment around him changed as it was bathed in the purple glow of his arcane energy.

The pain began to shoot through his shoulders as the pressure mounted. Then the weapon itself struggled, but luckily the legendary bow held up. It would be his body that broke down before it did.

It took nearly a minute until Jake knew it was time. With a final deep breath, he released the string, and the moment he did, several blood vessels burst on both his arms and most of his upper body, making blood soak his armor.

An explosion of power pushed away all energy around him, momentarily destroying every other affinity, resulting in even color and light blinking out of existence before it retook the vacuum left by pure destruction.

The arrow flew downward like a spear from the heavens, a purple vertical line descending towards the forest below. Jake slightly repositioned himself to make sure he could see where his target was hiding far below. Just in time, too, as the rodent noticed what was coming.

As he had predicted, it moved to dodge. A fraction of a second before it jumped, it was forced to dismiss its camouflage, and at that moment, Jake saw it once more. His Gaze landed on its form as his eyes glowed, the soul of his prey bare and vulnerable.

It froze. Unable to do anything but form a meager magical barrier to try and block the attack.

Then, a flash of light. A shockwave was released the moment the arrow hit the rabbit, blasting the rabbit down through the branch it had been sitting on towards the ground below, sending wooden splinters flying everywhere. A second shockwave was released as a purple wave of energy was released, momentarily bathing the forest in the color of Jake's arcane mana.

When the light cleared, all Jake saw was a great pillar begin to topple, now blocking Jake's view of his prey. The tree the rabbit had been sitting on began to fall over due to the crater that had ripped out many of its roots, making it unable to keep standing.

Jake simply stared as it slowly fell, a mighty crash echoing as the tree several kilometers tall was now lying prone across the vast forest. At its base was a massive crater pulsing with purple veins of energy, fissures of pure arcane mana still humming with power.

In the middle, only a few feathers and pieces of broken antlers.

****You have slain [Sonic-Springfoot Wolpertinger - 201] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

He smiled as his body hurt all over. Arcane Awakening deactivated as a rush of pain went through him, and he knew he had overexerted himself. It felt as if he had just gone through a major battle, and he knew he was in no shape to fight... fortunately, he didn't have to.

Because he had accomplished his goal.

****Race Evolution Requirements Met****

Your Path to the apex continues, one step at a time. You have overcome and consumed curses, experienced and adapted different realities, and remained steadfast in your convictions. The labels placed upon you matter little as you know who you are. Yet more choices remain. Legacies of humanity await you as you get inspired by those of the past and the Paths they have walked.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N Google search *novel✕fire✕net*

WARNING: Postponing evolution may have adverse effects, and no further race experience can be earned before the evolution is completed

"Hell yeah," Jake muttered to himself through the pain. He read the message over a few times, and he was now more sure than before that this evolution would still just have him become a C-grade human like everyone else. A bit comforting, actually.

With a smile, Jake quickly made his way back to Haven, got on his good old bed from the Challenge Dungeon, and accepted the prompt as he disappeared, finally starting his C-grade evolution.

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Chapter 591: C-Grade

The soft fabric of the bed was replaced with the feeling of weightlessness as Jake was whisked away. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel·fire·net*

Oh, dear void, we meet again, Jake thought as he opened his eyes and found himself floating within the same space as all previous evolutions. The intense energy, unlike anything else, was all around him, ready to nourish him at any moment. It was truly energy unlike anything else, only found in this space and seemingly only operable by the system itself.

He moved his limbs a bit, just enjoying the sensation of floating there as he waited for the system to do its thing. It didn't take long before something happened. The energy all around him began to move towards him as a message appeared in front of him.

Congratulations! You have successfully managed to evolve into C-grade as a variant evolution.

All future potential variant evolutions will be blocked due to Origin.

Congratulations! You have successfully evolved to C-grade!

This message made it clear that he, indeed, was now set on his Path when it came to his race. When he would reach his intended grade, no one knew, but Jake looked

forward to that day. Jake did not have time to ponder more on his race as the evolution finally began for real.

His body became a vacuum of energy as it sucked in everything it could. His soul and body were both nourished and grew with every passing second as Jake felt himself change on a fundamental level. A portion of the energy also seemed to enter his Soulspace, and he felt Eternal Hunger be fed some of the energy. Even a mythical weapon could not forcefully claim any of this evolutionary energy, but it seemed like the system saw it fit to feed it nonetheless. The reason Eternal Hunger was fed was naturally due to the Eternal Shadow.

The mask did not absorb anything this time around, making Jake assume it was because he was now separate from the King. Even then, the amount of energy being funneled into Jake was intense.

As Jake felt all this, ripples went through him as he finally became able to see what he had evolved into.

Human (C) – You have reached a step on the evolutionary ladder few can ever stand on, and for that accomplishment alone, you should be proud. The human race is known as the most balanced and numerous races in the multiverse, being able to walk many different roads on their Path to power. With this evolution, you shall pick a small part of that future Path as you specialize further. Stat bonuses: +18 to all stats, +45 Free points per level.

It was the expected outcome, and Jake truly had no complaints. As expected, then all the stats gained had tripled – the same as when he reached D-grade.

The evolution was far from over, though, as the process of energy absorption only picked up until suddenly... it stopped. For a fraction of a second, Jake was confused until he remembered. He had read about evolutions for humans before but had kind of forgotten this aspect.

As you walk on the road pathed by your predecessors, you learn from the experiences of old. You view the Paths of those before you, and in turn, they bless you with their power. In return, they can only hope you will continue the tradition of passing down knowledge.

Ten Paths appear before you, all paved and proven. Take inspiration, and choose one that fits you to embrace the Records within.

No two evolutions were entirely alike, and this was the special feature of the one that humans got. Other races had their own varying special things. The gap between C-grade was far larger than the one between E and D-grade, and this was one of the reasons.

Within the void, the energy was frozen as ten roads began to condense. Some had paved stone reminding him of an old city street, others dirt roads, some the undergrowth of a forest, and others lonely and desolate stone.

At the end of each Path stood a version of Jake himself, but all wearing different outfits and all doing something different. Jake stared down the first of the Paths and saw a version of himself in what looked like old fur armor, surrounded by monsters, yet none of them seemed to see him as he was picking up a glowing orb of some kind.

Path of the Gatherer – A Human who walks the Path of a gatherer, forever searching for all there is to find and claim. As a gatherer, you do not only seek to acquire material goods, but all that can help humanity grow. Having far evolved past the need for food and sustenance, you search for the one true thing that matters: Knowledge. Permanently increases Wisdom, Perception, and Agility by 10%. Grants the [Wisdom of the Gatherer (Unique)] skill. Upon selecting this Path, you will instantly gain a one-time bonus to the Wisdom, Perception, and Agility stat.

Jake looked at his version of himself but shook his head. Looking to another road. There, he saw a version of himself wielding two swords in the midst of a battle with a wyvern of all things. He was wearing tough-looking armor, and his weapons were gleaming with the blood of his foe. Jake barely skimmed the Path, only viewing the important part about what stats this one revolved around.

Path of the Warrior - Permanently increases Strength, Toughness, and Endurance by 10%.

The next depicted Jake doing alchemy in a lab, wearing a robe. Jake once more shook his head and decided to not dwell too much on possibilities he would never pick.

Path of the Creator - Permanently increases Wisdom, Perception, and Willpower by 10%

The fourth showed Jake standing in the middle of what looked like the World Congress hall, surrounded by faceless humanoids.

Path of the Ruler - Permanently increases Wisdom, Willpower, and Intelligence by 10%.

Another one showing Jake silently sitting in a cave, meditating in complete calmness.

Path of the Hermit – Permanently enhances Willpower, Agility, and Vitality by 10%.

Jake standing in the middle of a burned-down city, corpses all around him, with a smile on his face.

Path of the Outcast - Permanently increases Vitality, Agility, and Intelligence by 10%.

A version that nearly made the real Jake puke as he saw himself wearing black robes on his knees in front of a statue depicting Villy while surrounded by fanatics.

Path of the Faithful – Permanently increases Wisdom, Vitality, and Intelligence by 10%.

The third to last displayed Jake surrounded by enemies on all sides, yet not a shred of fear was on his face as he remained stoic, his arcane magic revolving around him to form different magical constructs.

Path of the Indomitable – Permanently increases Vitality, Willpower, and Toughness by 10%.

In the second to last version, it was Jake standing bloody upon a massive corpse of a manticore, his bow in hand, and this version wearing nearly the same armor as Jake himself. This Path fit him really well, but it was not the one.

Path of the Slayer – Permanently increases Strength, Agility, & Intelligence by 10%.

Then there was the tenth Path. It was not actually the tenth going by order of appearance but had been the second Path of the ten displayed. Jake had saved it for last for a reason. Because he already knew this was the one from the beginning.

Gatherers were often paired with another way of life in humanity's history. While the gatherers collected all they could, this other group was in charge of obtaining a far riskier source of food and willingly risked their lives to hopefully defeat something much stronger than themselves.

Down the final Path Jake evaluated, he saw a nearly spitting image of himself, wearing the same armor and holding a bow with his back turned to Jake, staring at a monster of ridiculous size in the distance.

It was naturally the Path of the Hunter.

Path of the Hunter – A human who walks the Path of a hunter, forever seeking his next prey. Any community needs those willing to face dangerous foes to sustain the group, be it through gaining food or scavaging valuable materials of the slain prey in a dangerous situation. You have walked a Path where you do neither. You hunt not for material gain but for the experience, the Records, and the thrill. Permanently increases Perception, Agility, and Endurance by 10%. Grants the [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)] skill. Upon selecting this Path, you will instantly gain a one-time bonus to the Perception, Agility, and Endurance stat.

Note that all Paths are Paths to the pinnacle. Choose that which suits you.

There was no real decision to be made here. Even if the system said that all these Paths were equal in principle, only one of them truly fit who Jake was. He was , for Villy's sake.

As for the Paths themselves, Jake had read about them. It was a way to further specialize yourself, and getting a 10% increase to three stats was usually considered huge. It was still big for Jake, but this was an instance where diminishing returns on additive titles really came into play. The relative stat increase Jake would get compared to someone with barely any titles was more than noticeable. At least for the percentage part. Because with these Paths also came a one-time bonus. Quite a big one too.

Jake did not delay further as he selected the Path, and once more, time began to move, and the influx of energy resumed. All other paths ceased to be as the Path of the Hunter turned into pure energy. A rush of Records and energy went through his body repeatedly as his skin almost seemed to ripple. While experiencing this oddly wonderful feeling, he got some more prompts.

Per your choice to walk the Path of the Hunter, you will experience a one-time increase to all stats associated with the aforementioned Path. Perfect Evolution Stat increase applied. +550 Perception, +550 Agility, +550 Endurance.

Feeling the stat increase while also undergoing his evolution was nearly impossible. Feeling much of anything that was not his own body while within the void was hard, but Jake still went through all the other prompts.

***Race Skill Gained*: [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)] – You walk the Path of a hunter, a pillar of any community and one of the few who dare forage into hostile territory to hunt. Rather than stay and improve the safe settlements of humanity, you seek more power through the act of killing your foes and claiming all the bounty that comes with it. A potent yet risky Path. +10% Perception, +10% Agility, +10% Endurance. Increases all experience gained from slaying foes. Increases alignment to all classes or professions related to the Path of a Hunter. Allows you to more easily pass on Records related to your Path as a Hunter.**

His one race skill gained in C-grade, it seemed. Perhaps a bit underwhelming, but such were the race skills of the human race in general. Not that the skill itself was underwhelming. Sure, Jake didn't really need the part about teaching others his Path as a hunter or whatever, but everything else was great. More experience from kills and more "alignment" – whatever that meant – had to be good. Oh, and of course, the nice stat bonuses, but he already knew about those.

To scroll back a bit, the one-time increase to his Endurance, Agility, and Perception stat above had increased by 10%, too, due to Jake reaching level 199 in both class, race,

and profession before evolving. That prompt above had mentioned it already, but Jake had naturally gained yet another Perfect Evolution title.

[Perfect Evolution (C)] – You have undergone a perfect evolution to become a C-grade human. +660 all stats.

All in all, it was a massive increase numerically in his stats. However, that was far from all. Evolutions did not only improve oneself with an increase in stat numbers but also stat effectiveness. Every stat point mattered more than before, every health point more valuable, every mana point containing more energy, and every point in Strength made him stronger.

Exactly how much this was, Jake didn't know, but as with his D-grade evolutions, he felt at least twice as powerful as before. Without fighting, he would have no way of knowing, but he was confident that in his current form, he could handle ten of himself from before evolving without even using Arcane Awakening – with them naturally allowed to go all-out.

The next system message Jake had received was also a very expected one. He had gotten it at every evolution so far, after all.

****Bloodline Ability Evolved****

The evolution has stirred your Bloodline, allowing it to evolve along with you.

****Bloodline Ability Upgraded*: [Bloodline of (Bloodline Ability - Unique)] – Dormant power lies in the very essence of your being. A unique, innate ability awakened in the Bloodline of Jake Thayne. Grants the Sphere of Perception. Grants an improved sense of danger. Enhances all instincts and intuition. +25% to Perception.***

The description was the same as ever, and it added another 5% to his increase in Perception. Coupled with the 10% increase from the Path of the Hunter, Jake saw that he had now reached one of those numerical milestones that, in reality, didn't mean anything but still made him feel damn good.

He had reached a 100% stat increase in Perception. Was this overly massive compared to a 95% increase? No, no, it was not, but reaching 100% still felt significant somehow. Overall his stat amplifiers had gotten quite extreme by now, something he could only feel proud and happy about. There was just something satisfying about seeing numbers going up.

Within the void, Jake felt the intake of energy slow down significantly, and he knew the evolution was about to come to an end. The race evolution of humans was never the most exciting, though Jake had ended up making this one interesting through the

revelations it brought. Nevertheless, it was the profession and class evolutions where the real meat was at.

He then frowned as he already felt it just floating there. The improvement to his Bloodline was significant.

Jake still vividly recalled his last evolution and the resulting barrage of information once he returned to the real world. This case would be far worse than the one last time if he didn't do anything... but this time, he was far more prepared and knew it was coming.

As he knew he was soon returning to the real world, he focused his mind and tried to limit the Sphere of Perception. He reigned in all his senses and closed his eyes, trying to restrain himself as much as possible. His Bloodline naturally responded to his will, and while he had no way of knowing how far his Sphere extended within the void, he knew it had gotten far bigger and would have to be smaller for him to not risk passing out or causing severe damage.

Taking a deep breath, Jake was ready to return to his lodge in Haven. Prepared for all the bad things there were to come.

He wasn't just talking about the backlash from his own senses improving but something all newly evolved C-grades had to face:

The horror of seeing many of your hard-earned skills reduce in rarity.

The Fallen King felt the change instantly. The little hunter had finally bothered to evolve, thus opening the Path for the King too. At least the King did not have to wait long, as the fight with the alien Unique Lifeform had left him weakened and unable to evolve for quite a while. Not that the Fallen King wouldn't say it hadn't turned out for the better, as he had managed to consume the core of the Ashen Phantom Devourer and assimilated his Records into himself.

Standing within his domicile in the mountain range in which he had fought this other Unique Lifeform, he saw no purpose in delaying his claim of earned power. The prompt appeared before him as he willed it to be; the thought of evolution quests naturally a laughable subject for one such as he.

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Book Five Out on Amazon!

Another big hype day!

Today it is almost a year ago since book 1 was released on Amazon, and we are now already up to book 5. Time sure does fly fast.

Link to the book: <https://mybook.to/primalhunter5> Content originally comes from novel~fire~net

The book covers the entire Treasure Hunt, and as always, any support is highly appreciated. Sadly, there is no release of the Audiobook on the same day as the narrator (Travis Baldree) is seriously overbooked and simply hasn't gotten to it yet (I take no responsibility for releasing massive books every three months).

Thanks as always, and have a nice weekend! Oh, and here is the cover:

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

Chapter 592: The Ups and Downs of Evolution

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 200 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

The level was gained, and he returned to the real world.

Jake had been prepared this time around. He had steeled himself and done all he could to limit his senses to not experience sensory overload. His control since he became D-grade had increased significantly, and Jake had far more confidence this time around when he was teleported back to the bed in his lodge.

The moment he appeared, he was still hit hard. Thousands of smells, extremely loud sounds and so much information from his Sphere got fed straight into his brain. He imagined colors he didn't even know existed, impossible sounds, and the mana in the air felt suffocating.

Gritting his teeth, the cracking sound from some of them breaking was deafening, but it allowed him to focus on that one sound. He kept grinding his teeth, the sound echoing within his head like he was living inside a drumset, and he focused solely on this noise as he tried to filter everything else away. Not opening his eyes had been a godsend, and for a few moments, he even considered just stabbing something into both of his eardrums.

Minutes passed by, and slowly, he felt some calm. The sounds were now more muted, and his body and mind adapted to all this new sensory information. Increases in senses like this from evolutions were completely normal, and everyone felt these heightened senses, but usually, the system helped in advance. It did still help Jake, but only with the same level of assistance it would give everyone else. This is to say, it was far from enough.

The smells were still bothering him, primarily because he could not distinguish or place them. It was just a huge mass of different scents, some of them nice, some of them foul, but all mixed together in this amalgamation of pure stench.

Muting these smells took a while as Jake began to breathe heavily, taking in some of the atmospheric mana.

Throughout it all, Jake had managed to restrain the worst offender when it came to sensory overload: his Sphere of Perception. Even then, it had still grown to nearly five hundred meters, and Jake knew this was due to his suppression of it. The level of detail throughout the Sphere remained mostly the same, but he detected more energy now compared to before. For a few moments, it had felt like he was back in the Forgotten Sewers dungeon filled with dark mana, blinding him entirely. Luckily, his instinctual filtering quickly kicked in and helped.

Choosing to shelve the issue of the Sphere for now, Jake opened his eyes and, surprisingly enough, felt fine. He was confused for a moment until it clicked. Jake was used to using his eyes a lot and straining them to the utmost, while he usually didn't actively practice and use his sense of smell and improved hearing as those two were more obstacles than beneficial outside of tracking.

It was a bit the same with many of his other senses. His sense of touch, the sensation of pain, and other senses like that were something Jake was used to and, in many ways, desensitized to. They also just didn't feel as overwhelming as the auxiliary senses.

Jake, to do a test, took out one of his hated enemies from his inventory: a mushroom. He stared at it for a moment before throwing it into his mouth and chewing.

"Still tastes like shit," he muttered as he gulped down the necrotic toxins within the fungi. Nothing seemed to have really changed with his sense of taste, so that was good, at least. There were still many other tests left, but Jake returned to his Sphere once more.

Focusing, Jake slightly released it, feeling it spread out. Six hundred meters, seven hundred, eight hundred. The added area covered for every meter it extended was larger than the one before, making the pressure on his psyche only grow. After it reached a kilometer, Jake had to stop and forcefully pull it back into around the four-hundred to five-hundred meters range where it felt the most manageable.

The maximum limit is... a lot higher.

He had already limited it in D-grade, but now he had to limit it even more. It annoyed him as he felt like he was wasting potential, but on the other hand, he knew processing so much information was too much for him. Even at a few hundred meters, he didn't truly process everything at once, but it felt more like certain things happening within triggered instinctual responses making him notice it.

Even so... Jake wanted to see how far it could truly go. Was it risky? Yes, but he was also far more durable now, and even if there were some issues, he believed in his own ability to recover. It should be fine. Definitely.

I can take it... right?

Yeah, he should be able to.

Oh well, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Closing his eyes and cutting off all other senses, Jake let go for but a fraction of a second. It was as if a pulse was released that went outwards and took a snapshot of everything it encountered on the way before finally being cut off, leaving Jake with just an image in his head – and a splitting headache.

As for the range... Jake felt it as the pulse spread and scanned everything.

A kilometer, twelve-hundred meters, fifteen hundred meters, two kilometers... three... five... ten... twenty... fifty... a hundred... two....

Jake saw Arnold in his workshop at the Fort. He saw Miranda in her office, a party around a hundred kilometers out in the forest, every single home at the Fort, every single person living there, every single thing...

Jake was overwhelmed as the mental picture faded before he could process even a fraction of it, and he opened his eyes as he felt the blood drip down onto his shirt, coming out of his nose. He just stared a bit into the wall as he frowned.

A bit over two hundred and fifty kilometers. That was the actual range of Jake's Sphere of Perception if it was fully released. It was so large there was simply no way to process all this information... it was just not possible for a C-grade. At least not Jake. Maybe someone like Arnold could, with some of his special skills and his fucked up mind that had probably been warped by eldritch influence.

However, while Jake could not process all this information, that didn't make it useless. Closing his eyes once more, Jake repeated his action, releasing another pulse. It swept out, and this time Jake did it with a purpose. His instinct guided him, and as the snapshot faded, he still felt something.

Over a hundred kilometers away, a Mark had been placed on Arnold's assistant. A smile crept on Jake's lips. "The possibilities..."

Jake was turning into a living, walking, surveillance state. At least some of the time. Just releasing a few of these pulses made him feel drained, and he knew he was straining himself whenever he did it, making it a limited technique only to be used sparingly.

Shaking his head, Jake moved on to another thing he had dreaded facing nearly as much as the outcome of his Bloodline evolution:

Skill rarity adjustment.

All newly evolved C-grades would experience this horror, and Jake chose not to needlessly delay his suffering. He had already been spammed with messages and dove straight into it.

Skill Rarity Adjustment Initiated.

As your power grows, so do your Records. What may have been an achievement before is now only to be expected, and what may have seemed rare before may now merely be uncommon. Thus, an adjustment must be made to represent your progress.

All skills will be adjusted to your current grade, resulting in potential downgrades in rarity. All functionalities of the skills will remain unchanged. Some skills may be adjusted without having their rarities affected. This may or may not result in increased difficulty of further rarity upgrades.

Even if the description said the skills wouldn't get nerfed and be worse, that didn't really make Jake feel that much better. It still sucked to see the rarities decreasing. It felt like taking a step back on one's progress.

It also mentioned that some skills were downgraded without losing their current rarity. Every rarity was a spectrum, so if a skill was at the peak of legendary and close to reaching mythical rarity, it would likely stay the same. Some skills also just wouldn't ever downgrade due to how they worked. Brew Potion and Concoct Poison were two examples of this.

Speaking of those skills, Jake already knew that the massacre would be worse with his class than his profession, so he started with the gentler of the two. Newest update provided by *novel♦fire♦net*

Profession Skills:

Note that some skills that did not experience a downgrade in rarity did have their relative rarity lowered.

Rarity Adjusted:

[Alchemist's Purification (Common)] --> [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)]

[Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)] --> [Alchemical Flame (Common)]

[Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)] --> [Cultivate Toxin (Common)]

[Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)] --> [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Epic)]

[Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)] --> [Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)]

--

Five skills were downgraded... that wasn't terrible, actually. It still hurt, but some of them were expected. Then again, he felt pretty damn called out for never really using something like Purification by the skill now being Inferior-rarity. It wasn't Jake's fault he didn't really need the skill.

Alchemical Flame downgrading was a bit sad, and as for the others, it was expected. While Jake had used all of the skills, he hadn't used them a lot and had not really worked on actively improving them. Core Manipulation and Soul Ritualism were both skills he had used for the Bee Queen ritual, and he planned on getting them up to speed when he got back to that project too.

As for the others... time would tell.

Finally, he had the profession skills that did not experience a change in rarity.

Rarity Unchanged:

[Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)]

--

Jake had already predicted all of the Legacy skills would stay the same, and he had been proven right. Honestly, looking at the list, he only saw one skill he was surprised had remained at its rarity. He did not remember using Legacy Teachings much, and yet

it remained at legendary rarity. Actually, it was pretty much entirely passive, so perhaps he did use it unknowingly? Hard to tell.

Anyway, overall, the profession skills had gone as expected, and there were no nasty surprises. Jake still looked forward to seeing what would happen to Path of the Heretic-Chosen, but that would have to wait for his profession's evolution.

For now, Jake moved on to what he had dreaded far more. His class.

Class Skills:

Note that some skills that did not experience a downgrade in rarity did have their relative rarity lowered.

Yeah, yeah, same as last time. It couldn't be that bad with the downgrades, right?

Rarity Adjusted:

[Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)] --> [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)]

[Splitting Arrow Rain (Epic)] --> [Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)]

[Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)] --> [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)]

[Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)] --> [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Rare)]

[Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] --> [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)]

[Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Ancient)] --> [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)]

[Arcane Powershot (Ancient)] --> [Arcane Powershot (Epic)]

[Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] --> [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)]

[Arcane Awakening (Legendary)] --> [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)]

[One Step, Thousand Miles (Legendary)] --> [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)]

--

It was as bad as he had feared.

Ten skills were downgraded, Three of them legendary and three of them ancient. Jake nearly felt physical pain just looking at it, seeing nearly all of his core skills reduced. Some of them he understood, like Descending Dark Arcane Fang and probably also Arcane Powershot, but for Arrow of Ambitious Hunter to downgrade was a surprise. Then again, the skill had been given at level 90 and had not been upgraded since. He really needed to work on it.

Arcane Awakening downgrading also hurt, especially as Jake now instinctively knew the skill had gotten quite a bit harder to use now. Before, he could keep it up for a long time and even be in the fully activated state for a long time, but with the evolution and the percentage boost staying the same, that had changed. Activating it above the safe 30% was now something he had to do with forethought.

Or whenever he felt like it while just taking the bigger backlash that would follow. This was not due to the downgrade in rarity but simply because he had just reached C-grade and gotten a lot of stats, making a 60% boost utterly massive.

On a side note, One Step, Thousand Miles downgrading was completely expected. This skill was so widely known that the fact it would downgrade was something Jake had already read about. Now, Steady Aim downgrading also wasn't that big of a surprise, but it still sucked. He liked having a lot of legendary skills.

At least there was one pleasant surprise. Jake had expected his two stealth skills to downgrade, but somehow Arcane Stealth and Superior Stealth Attack had retained their rarity. He wondered if they had actually been close to upgrading or if there was some other reason behind it.

Luckily, even if it felt like he had just been punched in the face from these downgrades, some skills had not betrayed him.

Rarity Unchanged:

[Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Moment of (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)]

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Needless to say, Jake was the happiest about seeing Eternal Shadow of still a mythical skill. His archery skill staying was also nice, and Fangs of Man not downgrading was a bit surprising. Moment and Gaze, he totally understood, and Relentless Hunt felt so damn powerful to Jake he didn't question it either.

It still bore repeating how much it sucked to have skills downgraded. Fifteen skills in total had fallen in rarity, most of them the core skills Jake used all the time. Trying to

look a bit on the bright side, it offered him a chance to upgrade them once more. Having created one mythical skill, Jake also felt more confident in making more, and if he understood the system properly, having created one made getting more far, far easier.

Knowing there was nothing he could do to change reality, Jake moved on, and he instantly had a thought. And a smile appeared.

As Jake was finally done going over all these horrible downgrades, he had something he needed to do. During the pulses of Sphere, he had seen Arnold and knew the man had reached C-grade, which meant Jake had something extremely important to do before he could continue with all of his evolutions.

Getting off the bed, Jake rushed out and enjoyed his increased speed. He was faster, stronger. His speed had increased to a whole new level, and Jake beat his record of traveling from Haven to the Fort by nearly three times. Once he got there, he beelined for Arnold's metal dome, and he was let in without question. Arnold was in his workshop, looking just the same as before despite his evolution.

"Hey, Arnold, did your mythical skill downgrade to legendary after you evolved!?" Jake quickly asked the mad scientist as he stormed into the workshop.

"Yes, but I should be able to—"

"Get fucked; mine didn't!" Jake said in return before swiftly making his exit, leaving a very confused Arnold behind. With glee, Jake flew back to Haven to continue his evolution after completing this imperative objective and getting a good ego boost.

Now the question was... profession or class evolution first?

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Chapter 593: A Way More Professional Evolution

Okay, Jake had perhaps been a bit too excited about his evolution when he had gone to visit Arnold, and it was probably also not a good idea to annoy the guy you wanted to make stuff for you. Even if Jake didn't want favors from him — which he did - pissing off a mad scientist with an army of drones also seemed unwise.

To make things worse, Jake planned on going to visit him to ask about the Nanoblade after all his evolutions were done, but now he had just turned things awkward. He could go and apologize then and there, but wouldn't that just make things worse? He had no

idea, and he failed to resist using his Sphere Pulse – the official new name - once more. He took a new snapshot only to see Arnold back at work, his neutral facial expression the same as ever.

At least he didn't seem bothered, so Jake would just let it rest for now. He had evolutions to do, didn't he?

He could evolve either his class or profession first, and while the order didn't matter whatsoever, Jake did recall evolving his class first at D-grade. As a supporter of equality, Jake found it only fair to go with his profession first this time around.

Without further ado, Jake got started as he willed the message to appear, and his profession evolution could officially begin.

****Profession Evolution Requirements Met****

Living paradoxes tend to be transient beings, unstable amalgamations of circumstance that cease to be once the feeble balance is broken and one side has to give in. Yet you remain a heretic and a Chosen. The two sides are perhaps not equally represented in your Path, but a balance has still been struck that allows both to persist in harmony, amplifying one another. Your heretical actions instead seemingly bring you closer to your Patron, as you have gladly embraced the Legacy of the Malefic Viper. Not that you shy away from less-used means, willingly deploying curses to further your goal. Your alchemy has also only grown, your poisons ever more potent, yet something else has appeared too. Something that causes Origins, Records, and Paths to warp in your wake. To what extremes will you go?

Begin evolution now?

Y/N

WARNING: Postponing evolution for too long may have adverse effects, and no further profession-experience can be earned before the evolution is complete.

The system just kept being so nice in all these long messages describing his Path and whatnot. The message itself was as expected, primarily about Jake being a heretic and a Chosen, at least until the last few sentences. It mentioned Jake's curses, his alchemy getting better, and then that ominous final part about warping Origins and Paths and whatnot. Definitely related to all the things Jake had done that created things like Eternal Hunger – both versions – and of course, Sandy. A bit of Sylphie, too, for sure.

He already had a good idea of what kind of profession upgrades he would get and stopped delaying as he jumped right into it.

The first option was indeed one he had expected.

Planetary Leader of the Malefic Viper – The will of the Malefic One is omnipresent, expanding to all worlds and all realities. As a World Leader, you support the Order of the Malefic Viper, dedicating the lives of all who live on your planet to the Order and the Malefic One. Planetary Leader is a profession focused on managing and guiding a planet to glory. Grants skills related to management, economics, leadership, and control, as well as methods to protect your new dominion. However, be warned that should the planet be destroyed, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +35 Vitality, +35 Wisdom, +30 Willpower, +60 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Planetary Leader of the Malefic Viper.

Becoming World Leader was usually viewed as a massive achievement and a Path in itself. For Jake, it had just been an annoying responsibility he chose to take on, and in all truthfulness, the quality of this upgrade reflected that. It was a pretty bad version of World Leader and didn't even include any of his Chosen or heretic stuff in there. It was a barebones one that sounded a lot like what Arthur had feared Jake planned on becoming to control Earth.

It was a profession Jake could see quite a few people in the Order of the Malefic Viper possess. If the Order had a lot of planets under their control, that is. Jake really didn't know as he wasn't overly invested in his friend's culty social club.

Stat-wise it gave 160 total, which was... okay? As was shown in the race evolution, the stats tripled once more in C-grade, bringing the maximum a profession could give from 80 to 240. 160 put the profession above average but still pretty bad in Jake's eyes. It was the same as a profession giving 60 total stats in D-grade, so way worse than what he had before. Also, losing or changing skills? Yeah, no thanks.

He did not doubt that people like Arthur and Miranda would get offered skills related to being Ministers and on the council, with even the Sword Saint perhaps getting an annoying option to skip. Which was, of course, exactly what Jake did as he moved on. And the Heretic-Chosen stuff came early, it seemed.

Heretic-Chosen Prophet of the Malefic Viper – Your Path is long, lonely, but potent. It would be a shame to walk it alone. Bring others into the fold, allowing them to see your reality and no longer merely serve the gods as their tools but as their equals. A foolhardy vision, perhaps, but it is your vision nevertheless. As his Chosen - his prophet - you still keep expanding the Order while not shying away from the heretical, creating a Path few would willingly follow. Your skills in Alchemy remain, but you create not for yourself or the love of the craft but to respect your Patron and remain close to him. Grants skills related to alchemy, persuasion, manipulation, and religious practices. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. Be you a corruptor or a savior, only you can decide as you embrace the

moniker of Prophet. Stat bonuses per level: +60 Willpower, +50 Wisdom, +30 Vitality, +25 Int, +40 Free Points.

See, if Jake didn't know better, he would think the system was trolling him with options like this. In what world had the system observed Jake and everything he did during his entire journey and reached the conclusion that, yeah, Jake would for sure love becoming a prophet. It would be the most awkward shit Jake could imagine if he had to go around playing mega-priest for Villy.

Also, he did bite onto the fact it did not only include stuff related to the Malefic Viper but was also about leading others onto the Path of a Heretic. Just an interesting observation.

When he looked at the stats, it was actually pretty good, at 205 per level. It would still be a quality downgrade compared to his D-grade profession, but not horribly so. He did have a suspicion that there existed way better versions of this, and a bit like with the World Leader one above, he just didn't get it offered as it didn't suit him. At least this one didn't make him lose any skills... but it was a no. A fuck no, even.

Moving on.

Heretic-Chosen Cursed Corruptor of the Malefic Viper – Corruption is at the core of the Malefic Viper's Path, but can it be taken too far? It is your aim to find out. You have begun to deviate from the Malefic One, implementing the power of curses into your Path – something even your Patron rarely did due to the innate volatility of curses. Your skills as an alchemist wane as you specialize in only the act of transformation and transmutation through the art of corrupting anything and anyone. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. May your touch be as feared as that of the Malefic One, and your mind stay true to your Path, lest the curses consume you. Stat bonuses per level: +70 Willpower, +40 Vitality, +40 Wisdom, +20 Perception, +15 Int, +30 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Heretic-Chosen Cursed Corruptor of the Malefic Viper.

Now, Jake had expected to see at least one option talking about curses, and this sure fit the bill. Looking at it more closely, Jake was a bit surprised at how different it still was compared to his expectations. It wasn't even an alchemy profession anymore but was all about corrupting things. It was some extreme version of transmutation from the looks of it. The stats were good, at 215 per level, which was only 25 short of the theoretical maximum. This did mean it firmly fell within the realm of having some drawbacks besides the whole heretic-chosen dichotomy. Probably had something to do with all the curse stuff.

Yeah, definitely the curse stuff. Fresh chapters posted on [novelfire.net](#)

Jake was not really against using curses on a fundamental level, but that didn't mean he wanted to go down a Path only revolving around them. He also liked his alchemy, and this profession would cut that away entirely, it seemed, with him potentially losing skills just from selecting it. It was definitely a no from him just based on that. He did consider maybe using curse stuff a bit more, but he could do that as an alchemist too.

With two more professions to go, Jake was pleasantly surprised with the next one.

Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – Still, you walk a paradoxical path, understood by none but you and your Patron. The Path you walk continues to be Unique as you learn more about the Path your Patron once followed, his struggles, and even his mortality. Secrets most ancient beings would wish forgotten lay bare before you as you gaze upon Records only known by the Malefic One. Allows one to combine the natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. This rare type of alchemist specializes in the production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. May you continue to embrace your Path and all that comes with it. Stat bonuses per level: +50 Will, +50 Wis, +40 Vit, +30 Int, +25 Tough, +35 Free Points.

Hello again, Jake thought with a smile. It was his good old friend, Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. The description was very similar but had sprinkled some more stuff in there, especially the part about also learning about his mortality. Clearly, the skill referred to Path of the Heretic-Chosen with many of these references, making him already sure it would be one of the skills upgraded or affected by this evolution.

When it came to stats, it had only improved. Jake's D-grade version gave 74 stat points per level total, while this one gave 230. If it had just been a straight upgrade, it would only have given 222. Probably 225, as the system seemed to like sticking to numbers ending either in 5 or 0 during this evolution, but even so, this was better for sure. Was this a reward for surviving his Path, or perhaps just him moving closer to its true potential?

As mentioned, then 240 was the maximum amount of stats a profession could offer in C-grade, putting him only 10 stats per level away from it. Pretty damn fucking good if he said so himself.

Jake already loved this option, and it was damn good... but that only made him wonder. There was one more evolution option available. What exactly could that offer which was better? Jake checked it out with great interest.

Harbinger of Primeval Origins – All have an Origin; all have a Path to the peak. You shall be the Harbinger bringing forth that Origin. Allows you to awaken the Origin of other creatures and objects as you awaken primeval concepts within, resulting in the birth of things never seen before or long forgotten. As you

embrace this Path, so will you affect the Origin within yourself, embracing it fully as you shun all else but what lies within. With it shall come power, and all those around you will bathe in a presence that will forcefully passively affect their Records, pushing them toward their Primeval Origin. Grants skills related to the nurturing, improvement, and manipulation of Records in all living beings. Be the Harbinger of Primeval Origins and awaken all. Stat bonuses per level: +65 Will, +40 Vit, +40 Wis, +20 Tough, +75 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Harbinger of Primeval Origins.

Jake felt like the description said so much and yet so little. What he did know was that it was powerful. More powerful than any profession Jake had ever seen or read about – partly because the truly powerful ones were always kept secret. It practically oozed potential, and he did the rudimentary math to know how many stats it gave per level.

240.

The theoretical maximum. Which meant it came with drawbacks. Severe ones, from the looks of it, as Jake read it more closely.

Many drawbacks came not in the form of limitations of progress but through something far more insidious. Loss of control. Not necessarily loss of control of your own body like a berserker, but the loss of how you affected the world around you. The best example Jake knew of this was the undead species known as Plague Spirits that he had read about. These spirits sometimes appeared in areas with a lot of uncontrolled death-affinity mana, condensing from all the energy. These spirits were powerful but were also hunted down instantly if they occurred. This was due to them passively killing everything around them, the plague even consuming other undead. It was entirely uncontrolled, and even if these spirits could be intelligent, there was simply no way to allow them to keep living. That is unless you wanted to risk them wiping out entire solar systems before dying from starvation as they ran out of life to consume.

Oh yeah, he forgot the part about them being unable to regenerate resources but having to consume constantly just to stay alive.

This profession gave Jake similar feelings, albeit in a far less extreme fashion. It included words such as forcefully, mentioning it would change his own Records while shunning everything else. Rather than merely a profession, it read more like a true calling. A Path that he could and should dedicate everything to, a bit like Jacob and his Augur Path.

Jake was not blind to the implications of merely having it offered. He knew this came from all he had done to affect Sandy, Sylphie, and even himself. It was also a clue as to what exactly he did, mentioning Primeval Origins. However...

He had spent most of his life learning to control himself and his instincts. Choosing this profession was letting go of some of that control. He was not against what it stood for and wanted to accomplish, but how it would be done. Jake would be the one in control. He would choose who to affect.

Finally, and perhaps the biggest one. Jake would no longer be an alchemist if he went down this Path. As mentioned, Jake liked alchemy. He found it fascinating and fun and a great pastime when not killing things. He also liked all of the heretic-chosen stuff, even if he knew it was a bit weird.

Lying down on his evolution bed, Jake considered them both for a while longer, not wanting to make a rash decision. Usually, he had a gut feeling due to his Bloodline, but this time it was oddly silent. He knew why. Both choices were legitimate, and both would be great in their own way.

Ultimately, Jake knew what he wanted to be. It all came down to him liking alchemy and not wanting to forcefully affect others while not even knowing he did it. The thought just didn't sit right with him, and to that, his gut agreed.

Besides, who would keep Villy on the straight and narrow if he didn't have Jake to keep his ego in check? Couldn't leave it all in Duskleaf's hands.

Without further ado, Jake made his selection as he was hit with a rush of knowledge. There was also something else, something Jake should perhaps also have considered when making his choice:

How his choice would affect Villy.

****DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 200 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points***

It did not take long for a reaction to come.

"What did you do now?" the snake god asked him just as he picked the profession, Jake also feeling the slight shift in their bond.

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Chapter 594: An Even More Skilled Heretic-Chosen

Jake smiled as the Viper probed him. He felt the Blessing strengthen as he knew he had just entrenched himself even further with the Viper, and clearly, so did the snake god.

“Just upgraded my profession. A straight upgrade, the same name, too, meaning I am still a Heretic-Chosen Alchemist. So nothing overly exciting,” Jake answered his divine buddy.

“A straight upgrade that dragged even more out of me,” the Viper said. *“To a level where it is beginning to limit the maximum number of other Blessings I can give out.”*

“... Is that bad?” Jake asked with a bit of worry.

“No, I am not even close to reaching that maximum and probably won’t be unless I one day wake up and decide to give high-level Blessings to an entire planet. What actually happened isn’t the problem; it is the principle in the thing,” Villy answered, clearly not a trace of actual worry in his voice.

“My apologies, then,” Jake said with a grin.

“Did you at least get something out of it?”

“Let me check,” Jake answered, already knowing the answer as he checked the first of many notifications.

Your bond with the Malefic Viper is further strengthened as you now share not only a karmic and bodily connection but a bond of history and Records, sharing memories known to no one but the two of you. You will no longer be able to receive a new Blessing even if the Malefic One perishes unless you purge yourself of all his Records.

He had not expected that to happen. No longer being able to receive a Blessing would probably seem like a very bad thing to anyone else as that meant if the god started to dislike you for some reason, you would be screwed. Luckily for Jake, Villy could not take it back, so the snake god was fucked in that regard and would have to talk things out with Jake if they had problems. Or kill him. As for the Viper dying... yeah, Jake saw the chances of that happening as really fucking low, especially before Jake himself either died or reached godhood.

Jake checked his Blessing and saw that it indeed had changed slightly from this upgrade.

[True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)] – An Alchemist recognized by the Malefic Viper himself that has now seized parts of the Blessing in an act of defiance. Few throughout the ages have found themselves blessed by the Primordial, despite their desire to be so. You are his Chosen. Now even the true

blood of the Malefic Viper himself is found within your very being, only strengthening your bond further. Your Records are more and more intertwined with that of your Patron, and through a powerful direct karmic and bodily connection, the Wisdom, Willpower, Vitality, Intelligence, and Toughness of the Malefic Viper empower you. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom, +10% Vitality, +10% Intelligence, + 10% Toughness. Grants access to many new paths. Only one Blessing can be held at a time. Cannot be denounced or retracted.

“Villy, not to sound like an ass, but why do the stats tied to your Legacy suck so much?” Jake asked after seeing the Blessing had been empowered to also give an extra 10% Toughness. Why did it have to be Toughness? Jake didn't want Toughness.

“Wow, you come in here, steal some of my Records related to Blessings to empower yourself, and then complain about it not giving the stat you want?” Villy asked with a faux tone of outrage. *“Very heretical of you, that's for sure.”*

“Just following my Path. I firmly expect it to increase Perception next time,” Jake said with a smile. *“Anyway, I still got all the skill changes and upgrades, so talk to you later?”*

“Keep me posted on that Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill,” Villy said, finishing off the conversation so Jake could get back to business.

Going through his notifications, he saw they included three skills. Two that had experienced changes and one new. He began with the least exciting of the bunch.

[Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)] – The Malefic Viper stalks its prey and needs only to strike once as venom devours its prey. Increases the potency of all crafted poisons. Grants the ability to craft a poison with a rarity above that of your Concoct Poison skill if certain conditions are met. The poison may at most be upgraded to the rarity of the Malefic Viper's Poison skill (Rare --> Epic). Allows poison not to lose efficiency for a prolonged period of time after being applied to a weapon.

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[Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper stalks its prey and needs only to strike once as venom devours its prey. Increases the potency of all created poisons. Grants the ability to craft a poison with a rarity above that of your Concoct Poison skill if certain conditions are met. The poison may at most be upgraded to the rarity of the Malefic Viper's Poison skill (Rare --> Ancient). Allows poison not to lose efficiency for a long period of time after being applied to a weapon.

Together with Big Game Arcane Hunter – another skill he felt fairly confident would upgrade during his evolution – this skill was one of his unsung heroes. It was simple,

and while Jake had barely activated that special ability part of it to upgrade a crafted poison, it was still nice to have.

Needless to say, the primary benefit of this skill was that it just made everything poison-related better. It made all poison Jake crafted better and made it last longer when applied to a weapon. Both were great things that he took for a given due to the sheer passivity of the skill.

The changes from the evolution were nearly forgettable, except for one important change. The word “crafted” had become “created,” signifying that it now also included stuff like Fang and his Blood. Besides that, It just improved every part of it by a little, and that was it. In fact, the only real change was the rarity the triggered ability could upgrade to and the wording changing for how long poison would remain potent while coated on a weapon.

So, yeah. Great to see it upgrade, but otherwise, nothing overly exciting.

Next up was another skill Jake had expected to change.

[Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – A unique path between the Primordial known as the Malefic Viper and his Chosen, the Progenitor Jake Thayne. Allows you to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper on a far more direct level by relying on your direct connection as a Chosen and the mentality of a heretic. Focusing on the Malefic Viper’s Legacy’s core skills, a skill that you adequately comprehend will allow you to peer into its true Records as you journey through time, space, and reality, to experience history firsthand. Be warned that gains are not guaranteed, and while the journey cannot harm you directly, the journey may cause harm or have lasting effects – a risk you must take as a Heretic. May you walk with confidence as you tread a path never walked before. Gains 1 use every 10 levels in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Any skill can only be chosen once. Current uses remaining: 0

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[Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – A unique path between the Primordial known as the Malefic Viper and his Chosen, Jake Thayne. Allows you to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper on a far more direct level by relying on your direct connection as a Chosen and the mentality of a heretic. Focusing on any core skill, event, or entity related to the Malefic Viper’s Legacy will allow you to peer into the True Records of the past as you journey through time, space, and reality to experience history firsthand. Limitations on Record Fragment selection may apply. Be warned that gains are not guaranteed, and while the journey cannot harm you directly, the journey may cause harm or have lasting effects – a risk you must take as a Heretic. May you walk with confidence as you continue to thread a Path never walked before. Gains 1 use every 20 levels in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Current uses remaining: 0

Another skill that remained mostly the same, but with some subtle changes here and there. The biggest of which was in how Jake could use it. The old version required Jake to focus on a skill, while this version required him to focus on a skill, event, or entity. What this meant was in no way lost to him, and he already knew at least one goal during his journey through C-grade just from reading this skill:

To figure out more about what the hell was up with the First Sage. With the wording of the skill, Jake should even be able to focus on the guy directly and hopefully learn some spicy secrets. The skill was still a bit fast and loose with the actual requirements to trigger the skill, but hopefully, it would work. If not, then the limitation of only being able to focus on a skill once was also gone, so maybe he could use it to cheese out a great upgrade?

One thing he was sure of was that it wouldn't be a skill offering borderline free skill upgrades this time around. The gap between ancient and legendary rarity was big, but it was nothing compared to the gulf that separated legendary and mythical. The complexity of Eternal Shadow should be proof of that. This would only be doubly true in this instance, seeing that none of the Legacy skills had downgraded in rarity. Them not reducing in rarity still meant they had reduced in quality, and even now, he had seen that they hadn't been upgraded to give him more stats every level. Though that was perhaps something he could do something about... because a skill didn't have to upgrade in rarity to change slightly.

A project for later.

The number of uses he got had also been reduced to every 20 levels, and it didn't even give him a use right away. With it happening every twenty levels and C-grade being from 200-350, Jake would get a total of seven uses. Less than in D-grade, but with the expanded scope of what he could focus on, it wasn't that bad.

Overall, it was a skill Jake was looking forward to using more than ever. There was so much to see and so many juicy and embarrassing secrets of Villy for Jake to discover and make fun of him for.

With the two upgrades out of the way, there was still one more skill gained. In D-grade, every alchemist had gotten Craft Elixir, but there was no such basic crafting skill in C-grade. Not sure what to expect, he looked at the last one.

[Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – Expand your Path and allow others to walk in your footsteps. Allows the Heretic-Chosen to craft a Grimoire related to his Path, allowing another of the enlightened races to consume it, granting them either a class or profession. The nature of the Grimoire depends on a multitude of factors, including crafting ingredients, the will of the creator, and several unknowns. Requirements to use the Grimoire vary. A cooldown period is required between each crafting attempt, and a longer cooldown is triggered after a

successful Grimoire craft. Due to your unique Path, every Grimoire created will be more potent by default and receive additional Records based on all your stats.

After reading it and the instinctual knowledge that was given fitting into place, he still wasn't sure what to think. This was not at all the kind of skill Jake had predicted to get, even if he begrudgingly had to admit it fit his entire Path of the Heretic Chosen thing. This skill would allow him to spread his Path, creating these tomes that others could use to get a class or profession. Probably a profession.

He knew that crafting them was hard as fuck, but a dedicated skill would definitely help. Jake was also pretty darn confident it wasn't something he could do entirely alone. A high-level scribe would be needed to assist him in making the book itself, he reckoned.

It was also clear the system really wanted him to make one, with the last part pretty much telling him that it would lend a hand and make them better than normal. The boost also seemed significant, with it adding free Records just based on his stats.

Now, the ultimate question: would Jake actually make use of this skill? Jake had come across a total of three Grimoires in his life. The first one had given him the profession he had today, the second he had gotten from the Great White Stag and given to Lillian, and the third had been from the Treasure Hunt. That one had been the Fulgarian Depthcaller that Jake came to learn was killed unceremoniously by Scarlett. At least he had gotten good money for it.

The best usage case of a Grimoire was someone with a bad class or profession using it at the beginning of a grade to get a better one than what was offered. The second best option was using it right before evolution to hopefully get a variant of it in your next grade. Jake could already see some possibilities if he ever got into crafting it, but he wasn't sure.

What held him back was the entire heretic-chosen thing. Who could he actually make a Grimoire for? Especially if it was alchemy-related? The only one really on his mind was Meira, and he wasn't sure it would fit her at all...

Shaking his head, Jake wasn't sure if he would call the given skill a bummer or not. Others would be up in arms in excitement, but Jake just felt uncertain.

Done with all the evolution stuff related to the profession, Jake contacted the Viper again. The latest_episodes are on the *novel•fire•net*

"Hey Villy, done looking at stuff here. Here is the run down..."

Jake explained what he had gotten, not really bothering to hold anything back. The Viper did not seem surprised by anything either but did ask a few questions about Path of the Heretic Chosen, though he seemed to purposefully hold himself back from giving any suggestions or making any comments.

As for the Grimoire skill...

"Definitely look into crafting some," the Viper said with certainty. "I am not even saying you need to make use of them, just create them. Creating a Grimoire takes a lot of effort and a high level of comprehension of your own Path and the Records that is behind every concept. The skill helps tremendously, but you will still need to learn some things yourself, and that learning process will be incredibly valuable in other places. So even if you don't do it for others, do it for yourself. Also, I am sure that if it comes down to it, you can find people worth giving a Grimoire to. This can also just be for purely selfish reasons. Looking at someone else making use of Records similar to yourself can also be a great learning experience."

"Huh," Jake said. "I guess I hadn't thought of it like that. Good point; I guess I should look into it."

"I truly don't care if you do end up making more part-heretic, part-believers in the Order. In fact, I think it could be a fun and interesting experience and spice things up a bit. It would also be interesting to see what kind of variants you make," the Viper further added.

"Noted," Jake said with a smile. "Any other pieces of advice?"

"Don't neglect the Legacy skills you got from me, even if you don't have Path of the Heretic-Chosen to upgrade them so easily anymore. Even without getting them to mythical rarity, if you focus solely on the stat-increasing effect, you can-"

"-make them increase in stats without improving the rarity, but simply making them better legendary versions. Another semi-new thing to C-grade, from what I can gather. It feels like I didn't really see this happen before," Jake answered.

"Look at you," Villy said in a sickly sweet tone. "All grown up actually knowing system stuff yourself without being told. Brings a tear to my eye. Anyway, it is not a new thing, just far rarer in the earlier grades. The relative breadth of every skill rarity increases in every grade, so it would get quite silly if all changes required a full rarity upgrade in later grades. It only really applies to the higher rarities in your current grade, so most upgrades you see will still also result in a rarity change."

"Makes sense, makes sense," Jake nodded along. "Guess that is something I should work on for sure. Any other tips or inputs now that I got you?"

"Nothing that can't wait till you get back here," Villy said with a rather insidious undertone for some reason.

"Okay... well, see you later then," Jake said his goodbyes.

"I will be awaiting you..." the snake god said as he cut off the telepathic phone call while doing an exaggerated evil laugh, leaving it to echo even after the connection faded.

Wonder what that is all about, Jake thought, but just shrugged. Problems for later. He had more important things to deal with right now.

Namely, a class evolution.

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Chapter 595: An Impossible Path

Ah, class evolutions. Who didn't love class evolutions? They were often a lot more exciting than race and profession, even if this time around, the race one had been quite noteworthy, to say the least.

Jake had always viewed his class quite a bit differently than his profession. He felt closer to it, and he also knew why. The Heretic-Chosen profession hinted at the reason in the name alone – it wasn't truly his. His class only came from who Jake was, while the profession relied on Villy. As time passed, it began to belong more and more to Jake, but it would take a long time till he could truly claim it as his own.

On the other hand, his class had always been Jake's through and through. It belonged to him, and he didn't want it to be influenced by anyone or anything other than his own will.

As for expectations during this evolution... Jake didn't really have any major ones. He just hoped to get some good options and at least one or two that fit him. Also, he knew he would sure for sure get at least one option related to all the curse stuff. There had to always be curse stuff.

Without further ado, he began the evolution.

Class Evolution Requirements Met

Your avaricious hunt has proven fruitful and paved a Path of domination. Beasts more powerful than you are viewed as nothing more than prey, and those meant to be of equal strength are not even worth putting in your sight. You continue to expand your repertoire of tools to fulfill your thirst for battle, embracing all that you believe can grant you more power while not compromising your vision of a

true hunt – your horizon forever expanding. Monsters and enlightened alike recognize your Path and power, finding themselves influenced by you.

May your Path lead to the pinnacle and encompass all you desire, Primal Hunter.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

WARNING: Postponing evolution for too long may have adverse effects, and no further class-experience can be earned before evolution is completed.

The message was the third one he had seen during all these evolutions, and Jake could only nod at it. He was at least a little happy it didn't mention curses outright. It also repeated the same horizon theme that his archery had on it. The mention of people finding themselves influenced by him was a bit questionable and gave him a good idea of what he would be offered.

As one would expect, Jake started from the beginning and was surprised right off the bat.

Veteran Avaricious Arcane Hunter – A direct upgrade to the Avaricious Arcane Hunter class. Your Path remains pure, and your ambitions only grow. Avarice still burns within as you unhesitatingly seek stronger and stronger foes, embracing all means to attain victory. This class combines the pure Path of the hunter with the pure Path of arcane magic, driven by the endless Avarice, making the bow your weapon, amplified with arcane magic, but you also retain your abilities to face enemies in close combat, making your enemies despair at your simple and powerful – yet diverse - methods of attack. You will find yourself more powerful than ever as you stand before those stronger than yourself, and by decree of your Path, you shall come out victorious. Remain true to yourself, do not falter, and your Path shall prevail – as long as Avarice does not consume you. Stat Bonuses per level: +55 Per, +35 Agi, +32 Int, +30 Wis, +30 End, +20 Will, +18 Str, +25 Free Points.

See, Jake had expected a straight upgrade to his old class, but not like this. This was the most boring form of a straight upgrade. No, it was worse than that. His class in D-grade gave him 86 stats per level, and this one gave 245. Anyone with some level of skill in math could see 245 was not three times as much as 86. Anything under 258 stats per level would thus be a downgrade. In conclusion, it would reduce his stats per level in a relative sense and otherwise just be a bit boring.

It even had veteran in the name. Jake was certain every class with veteran in the name had to suck.

Not much else to consider as he skipped it. The latest_episodes are on_the_novel_fire_net

Apex Beastmaster – A friend, confidant, guide, and master. To beasts, you are viewed as both one of them, yet a being who stands above them, worthy of respect and reverence – a leader worth following not through force but their own desire. You embrace your bestial instincts, truly allowing you to connect with them. This class revolves around making use of your bond with beasts and monsters, empowering them as they empower you. Rather than have them fight in your stead, you join them on the battlefield as their alpha, leading them to victory, be it with a bow, blade, or nothing but your bare fists and your arcane magic. As you fight alongside your companions, may you grow and reach for the apex together, your existence as much that of a beast as a man. Stats bonuses per level: +40 Per, +40 Agi, +30 End, +25 Str, +20 Wis, +20 Int, +20 Will, +20 Vit, +15 Toughness, +30 Free Points.

He went straight from a shit option to a pretty damn good one. Just looking at the stats, this one gave him 260 per level, making it better than the 258 a C-grade Avaricious Arcane Hunter would offer if he got a real upgrade. Jake mentioned some things he had expected to be offered before, and this was one of them. Semi-unintentionally, Jake had made friends with a lot of beasts and also helped them progress quite a bit, making some offering of the Beastmaster variant predictable.

It also clearly borrowed a bit from the old Bestial Alpha Hunter upgrade he got offered in D-grade. Jake assumed the class would offer some good stuff for his melee fighting, some things to help empower his companions, and probably even a skill to create some special bond with them. A light version of the Union Bond Sylphie had made with Jake, perhaps. In theory, it all sounded fun and interesting, but Jake wasn't interested.

Besides, it was only the second offering. All the following ones had to be better, right?

Wielder of Eternal Hunger – It is said there lies power in ancientness. In emotions. In desire. You have taken all these and molded them into a weapon that might enter the annals of the multiverse's history and be remembered eternally. This class revolves around the usage of the weapon Eternal Hunger and the near-endless source of energy within. Curse magic is at your fingertips, but that does not mean you ignore all other tools, as they, too, can experience the power that lies in sin. You realize that the curse of hunger is not one to shun and suppress but grasp with all your might as you and your weapon become one and hunger in concert for power. With time, hunger shall claim all of your magic, leaving only a pure Path. Eternal Hunger will grow faster and evolve more as it embraces its primeval concepts as a true Sin weapon. Eternal Hunger will be forever bound to your soul, and your existences shall become interlinked. Stat bonuses per level: +60 Vit, +50 Agi, +50 Str, +40 End, +20 Tough, +15 Wis, +30 Free Points.

Jake would like to retract his statement that all the following options had to be better. Stat-wise, sure, 265 was 5 more stats per level total, but damn, did Jake not like the sound of this one.

What he did like was some of the implications behind the skill. The mere fact he had created and used Eternal Hunger had resulted in a high-tier class, proving the Records of his weapon were more than impressive. It also mentioned primeval concepts, and after seeing the Harbinger of Primeval Origins professions, he knew that was a big deal.

However, that didn't mean he considered the class a legitimate option. He did not want to become a full-on curse mage and did not want to risk changing himself in some weird way by walking a bit too close to the fire when it came to the Sin weapon. Jake and his cursed stabber were already plenty interlinked, and there was no need to make it worse than it always was.

Finding the option way too spooky, Jake thus moved on to another semi-expected one.

Heretic-Chosen Champion of the Malefic Viper – Some call you an instrument to carry out the orders of your Patron, others a heretic bringing out chaos, careless of the impact on the god you have presumably sworn loyalty to. As his champion, you use his Legacy as your base and wield poison and corruption as your weapons of choice. You do not care for your equipment as long as it brings you victory, and while your preferred weapon remains a bow, you do not shun embracing magics, even those outside of the scope of the Malefic One's Legacy. Your independent will, yet powerful tie to your Patron, shall be the cornerstone of your Path as you slaughter all who dare stand in your way. Your Path is your own, yet bound to greater things, not by force, but by choice. May you walk the balance between being a heretic and a Chosen as you claim the power from both aspects. Stat Bonuses per level: +45 Will, +45 Wis, +45 Per, +30 Agi, +25 Str, +20 End, +15 Int, +10 Vit, +45 Free Points.

His snake god pal just had to rear his scaly head in every evolution. What made it all the worse was that every time he did, the option offered was damn good. This one was quite a bit like the Hunter-Champion offering from D-grade but had leaned into his Heretic-Chosen Path, which had made it a lot more appealing. At the very least, he had gotten rid of Villy having to help distribute his Free Points. That part had always struck him as super weird.

Quality-wise, this was near the peak for a class. 280 stats per level was quite something, just 20 away from the absolute maximum possible. The stats themselves were fine, but they were not exactly the ones Jake would prefer. He still considered it, though.

Jake couldn't lie... he did see some appeal in this class. It was good, and it aligned well with his profession. Getting a class and profession working well together was a tried and

true Path to success in the multiverse, and Jake did not doubt this would work well with his alchemy.

There were some arguments against it, though. First of all, this was still very much a semi-mage class based on the stats offered. It would also pigeonhole Jake into a far more narrow Path of poison and one that followed Villy's far more closely. And that was the ultimate argument against this class.

Jake was not the Malefic Viper. He was fine with borrowing from Villy, maybe even a bit of stealing to get stronger. But he was not the Viper himself, nor did he desire to be his champion. That one-third of his Path already revolved around the Viper was fine with him, but that was it. Jake wanted to at least keep his race and class as his own, not too influenced by any other gods.

Moreover, the biggest argument of all to skip this one: it didn't even have Hunter in the name.

Something the next one sure did.

Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – To chase the horizon is to seek the impossible. Despite your chosen futile Path, you shall hunt it in your endless arrogance, refusing to give up even when faced with reality. For each step, it moves further away, yet for each kill, you feel like you inch closer to the unattainable. To chase this horizon, you have selected the bow as your primary tool, but you do not shun away from deploying your arcane magic or close-combat techniques, allowing you to use myriad methods to attain your goal. With every footfall, you encounter stronger and stronger foes, your Path only moving forwards, never backward. Yet you shall rise to the occasion at every turn, finding yourself stronger the more powerful your foe is. Do not turn away your gaze, but forever face the endless horizon till one day you attain the impossible and reach its edge – or at the very least slay whatever resides there. Stat bonuses per level: +60 Per, +40 Agi, +35 Str, +30 End, +25 Int, +25 Wis, +20 Will, +50 Free Points.

Out of all the descriptions, this had to be Jake's favorite. It was simple yet impactful. Jake liked it a lot, and he understood why. It all revolved around a single concept... one quite familiar to Jake. Before he even considered the class, he checked out his archery skill with quite a similar name.

[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. As your horizons expand, you realize flaws and build upon a foundation to make that expansion everpresent. You do not shy away from mixing archery with magic and making your arrows arbiters of your will. Your arrows will cross all horizons and bend over any obstacle to pierce your target, with only your own will limiting the possibilities. Allows you to apply your will to control the trajectory of arrows before releasing them. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a

***small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception.
Arrow trajectory control based on Willpower.***

Jake knew that the system liked to give classes, professions, races, and all kinds of descriptions for skills and whatnot metaphors that represented something greater. The Sword Saint and his Transcendence revolved around springtime, which seemed more like an analogy for youth and a time one was at one's prime. Even his Primal Hunter Bloodline was very much a conceptual thing, the word Hunter doing a lot of heavy lifting and having many meanings.

So, the question was... what did this horizon truly represent? Jake had theorized it had something to do with him using so many different ways to fight during earlier upgrades to his archery skill, and he still believed that was true. The horizon included breadth, but it was more than that. It was also a distant goal. The furthest away that one could see. As the description said, it was something one could never reach, as it would just move further away if you moved. You could get to what had been the horizon prior, but a new one would always form.

An endless struggle. Like chasing the gold at the end of a rainbow. An utterly foolish and futile waste of time that would never lead to success. If one chased the horizon, there was never even a way to go backward. There was a horizon to all sides, so unless you stood still and did nothing to progress your own power, you would still move towards a horizon. That was why Jake also believed that his archery skill also had to do with breadth. Everything that progressed Jake just a little would move him forward.

And... while it was true Jake would never be able to actually go to the horizon, it didn't mean he wouldn't be able to reach it. If not with his own body, then perhaps his arrows.

Jake sighed and got a bit more serious as he analyzed the class a bit more objectively. Arcane magic. Archery. 285 stats per level, making it the best one so far. A buttload of Perception per level, the most of all those offered. A Hunter class. Not affiliated with anything or anyone but Jake himself. There wasn't even anything about curses in it.

It even had a theming concept that encompassed Jake very nicely. It was not an upgrade to Avaricious Arcane Hunter but something at a higher level, still including parts about hitting above his weight class. It had gone above Jake's own greed and become a genuine Path with conceptual power.

He now realized he had severely underestimated his own archery skill. It was still considered a low rarity, and he had been a bit surprised it had now been downgraded earlier, but that was just because he didn't fully understand it. It was a skill that allowed Jake to expand his own horizon and reach targets further away. One that tried to allow him to get just a little bit closer to the edge.

To pursue the horizon was to constantly progress, not caring about actually reaching the goal. Jake knew it was impossible, but if it was fun to do... why not at least give it a try? If you enjoyed the journey, did the ending really matter?

With a smile, Jake shook his head. It was a bit silly, wasn't it?

Chasing the edge of the horizon? It was futile. But, Villy had said many times that achieving godhood was to do what everyone else thought couldn't be done.

Besides...

When had something being impossible ever stopped him before?

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 200 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

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Chapter 596: The Status of a C-grade & Silliness

Jake felt the influx of knowledge as his class evolved. For a moment, Jake felt as if he sitting within an endless void with only darkness all around him, except for a single horizontal line of light impossibly far away. He blinked, and it was gone, making Jake certain he had not actually been transported anywhere... it was just a vision.

It lingered for a while before Jake shook it off and returned his attention to what the evolution had brought with it.

Checking it out, he saw that he got one skill upgraded and another new skill, mirroring what had happened in D-grade. The skill that had upgraded was once more Big Game Hunter, with a name that was now just getting silly with how long it was.

[Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)] – A true hunter seeks not the easy prey but a true challenge. Your hunt has taken you further than ever before as your methods improve, and you have embraced the Arcane. The Avaricious Arcane Hunter has, through his many hunts, become more accustomed to facing higher-level enemies. Increases the user's resistance to auras and gives a small increase to Strength, Agility, Intelligence and Willpower while facing enemies above your class or race level. The bonus is based on the disparity between the level of your prey and you. Limit of 1.25x your level or 50 levels, whichever is highest. May your hunt be fruitful and your Avarice sated.

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[Horizon-Chasing Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] – A true hunter seeks not the easy prey but a true challenge. Your hunt has taken you further than ever before as your methods improve, and you have embraced the Arcane. As you forever chase the horizon, you have become more accustomed to facing higher-level enemies. Increases the user's resistance to auras and gives a small increase to Strength, Agility, Intelligence, and Willpower, and a substantial increase to Perception while facing enemies above your class or race level. The bonus is based on the disparity between the level of your prey and you. Limit of 1.30x your level or 75 levels, whichever is highest. May your hunt take you toward the horizon.

A bit of change to the flavor text, with substantial changes coming in the later part. It had upgraded all current functionalities and increased the level cap of when he would get extra bonus stats, but more importantly than all that, it had finally added Perception to the list of bonus stats.

More than that, it had done so that the skill boosted Perception more than the others. Jake touched on it before, but together with Malefic Viper's Poison, this was one of those unsung heroes that he never really thought about. It was just there, always in the background, always making him stronger. Looking at it also made Jake more determined to hunt higher-leveled enemies more often. He had fought a lot of powerful variants lately, making them not above his level by much but still powerful. Of course, there was also the fact he was right at the end of a grade before, while he had now just entered C-grade, giving him 150 levels before the next evolution.

Jake was more than satisfied with the upgrade and looked forward to feeling and mentally noting the effect of the skill for two fights before forgetting it existed until his next evolution.

Moving on, Jake had only gotten one skill this time around. Another passive skill, from the looks of it, and a pretty weird one at that.

[Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)] – To allow your arrows to reach the horizon unblemished and unobstructed is nothing but a given for a hunter of the Horizon's Edge. Allows your arrows to gain significant resistance to all environmental factors and far more easily destroy any environmental energy or material. Grants a slight increase in penetrative power against energy-based defensive barriers and magical interference that may obstruct the arrow. The potency of the Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon skill is determined by the inherent power of the arrow. The maximum and minimum potency of Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon is determined by Perception.

He called it a weird one, but it was still pretty simple in concept. Just not what he had expected.

The skill would effectively allow Jake's arrows to have less trouble when in flight, and with how he understood it – and the instinctual knowledge granted from the skill confirmed – he could now ignore things like wind resistance in most cases. More than that, he would now be able to far more easily shoot through obstacles that were considered environmental. That meant he could be able to shoot through rocks or soil, while something like the trees would still prove difficult as they were living beings.

To add on, the skill even helped a bit against magical barriers and what the system called “magical interference,” which Jake was not 100% on what that meant. Maybe it meant domains or something like that? Such as the flames around the Fireheart Bears he had killed? Yeah, that seemed probable.

In the end, this was the kind of skill Jake would have to test out in the field to fully understand. Something he sure planned on doing in not that long.

Done with all the evolutions and now firmly in C-grade, Jake pulled up his full status.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne This update is available on *novel•fire•net*

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 200]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 200]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 200]

Health Points (HP): 81070/81070

Mana Points (MP): 151421/151421

Stamina: 83881/83890

Stats

Strength: 6649

Agility: 11568

Endurance: 8389

Vitality: 8107

Toughness: 6393

Wisdom: 9691

Intelligence: 8207

Perception: 19251

Willpower: 8193

Free Points: 130

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

Class Skills: [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Rare)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)], [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Horizon-Chasing Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)], [Moment of (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Cultivate Toxin (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Epic)], [Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [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)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

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

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It hadn't gotten that much longer since the last time he checked, only adding a few new skills. One in each category, to be more exact. Some changes were better than others, of course. Seeing so many of his skills reduced in rarity was painful on a fundamental level, but this was sadly just how the system worked. At least he could now upgrade them all again and hopefully come back stronger than ever.

The biggest change in his status was naturally his stats which had all experienced explosive growth.

However, he did begin to notice some issues. 6649 Strength versus 11568 Agility was quite a disparity, one far bigger than before he had evolved. The primary offender was the extra 550 Agility from the Path of the Hunter during his race evolution and the 10% extra stats in it too. Jake now had an 80% multiplier to Agility and only 60% to Strength, making the disparity only grow. At least he got 35 Strength and 40 Agility from every level in his class, making the difference not grow that much.

But that still left him with an issue here and now. He knew it would begin to negatively impact his combat potential if the stat fell too much behind, even if he didn't rely on it as much as others. He looked at it for a good while before shaking his head.

I can decide later.

He did have 130 Free Points from the evolution to spend, and he would gain far more. In fact, he got a lot of Free Points. 50 for every class level was quite insane alone, which should allow him to shore up any weaknesses. He also had room for more elixirs now, and he saw that the cap of stats one could get from elixirs was 45 per race level this time around. Three times the 15 it had been in D-grade, making it scale like everything else.

Jake also had to look into getting new equipment now. His stats from equipment was right now 6400, but he could have a total of nearly 12000 if he had good enough stuff. That was over 5500 missing stats just from not wearing C-grade equipment. Effectively, these stats were not as good as the usual ones as they didn't scale with his percentage amplifiers, and some skills didn't amplify them either, but it was still a major lack of potential power.

Lying down on the bed, Jake smiled a bit to himself. More elixirs, new gear, looking into making grimoires, getting the Bee Queen ritual properly started, exploring his new skills, getting some levels, upgrading some skills, getting levels... so many things, with even more he had probably forgotten.

But more than any of that, he had to consider his upcoming trip off-world. Nevermore was calling, and Jake needed to be ready for the mega-dungeon World Wonder.

As for who he would go with... he already had a few in mind. One of which he felt approaching at a quite frankly alarming speed.

Sylphie whooshed through the air as it told her a lot of funny and interesting things. The wind had gotten a lot more talkative, though it often just said weird stuff that didn't make any sense. But that was okay; the wind wasn't really a person, so it wouldn't make sense if it made sense. Sylphie still understood anyway.

She liked flying around and zooming really fast, though it was a bit boring right now. Finding baddies to beat up had gotten super hard after she had done another growing up, and now everything was either not grown up like her or didn't wanna fight her. The wind did tell her about some strong baddies, and she had wanted to go say hi to them, but then Sylphie felt something.

Uncle was back at the home with the bananas, and he had now also grown up! Sylphie was so excited and rushed over. She had just been visiting mom and dad, who were both busy hunting the weak baddies, and had told her not to help, which she thought was pretty unfair. She liked helping.

Mom and dad could be really super silly sometimes. Sylphie was definitely sure of that. Most people were actually super silly a lot of the time when Sylphie really thought about it... or maybe Sylphie was just the smartest? Definitely possible. For sure, she was smarter than Uncle, as anyone smart would have thrown away that smelly pot a long time ago or at least begun hitting people with it.

Anyway! Both her parents said Sylphie was now nearly grown and had to be more serious, but that didn't make any sense at all. Sylphie was always super serious; that was why she was so good and could grow up so fast.

Also! Big Bird said that growing up was "overrated" or something. The other kind of growing up, Sylphie came to learn, not the kind of growing up that made her wind windier. Sylphie agreed on that one; Sylphie didn't need to change. She needed to be like the wind getting windier, and as Sylphie, get Sylphier.

But... she did get that Polymorph skill thingie that allowed changes, and as Sylphie was smart, she had to learn how to use it. She had heard about many not-humans using the skill to change how they looked. Sylphie could do that too, and she wanted to show Uncle that as she quickly approached the banana home.

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Jake smiled as he walked out of the lodge and jumped upwards to get above the trees, allowing him to see the speeding green murder ball fly straight toward him.

He could easily feel that he was not the only one who had reached C-grade, and from the looks of it, the little bird had evolved quite a bit before him. Jake knew Sylphie was powerful and that she would grow into her power with time, but he still found himself pleasantly surprised by her progress.

[Juvenile Sylphian Hawk – lvl 204]

However, he was a bit surprised to see that Sylphie had indeed manipulated her own form using the Polymorph skill to change significantly. And when Jake meant significant, he meant that she had changed some of her feathers to a lighter shade of green to better match the color of her small vest from Treasure Hunt.

Seeing Uncle reminded Sylphie of something else!

Whaleman was weird.

Whaleman was one of the funniest things she had ever seen, mainly because he was a Whale and not a Whaleman, so why had he started to look like a Whaleman? Whale couldn't even swim fast while looking like a Whaleman, but now Whale had become a Whaleman nearly all the time. At least the big annoying eating worm was better than that, knowing that being a human-looking worm would be mega weird. Why would anyone even bother looking like an Uncle or a Punching Lady? That would just be silly.

Besides, Sylphie thought very smartly, humans had some big flaws. Like how big they were.

As she flew over to Uncle, she did a pivot in the air and landed right in her nest on top of Uncle's head. It felt a bit different than before, but it was okay, and she used her talons to put all the hair in the right places before sitting down and making herself super comfy.

Silly human beasts couldn't sit in her nest on Uncle's head, so why would she ever become human-looking?

That would just be silly.

"Hey, Sylphie?" Uncle asked her, making Sylphie look down and ask what he wanted.

"Ree?"

"When did you evolve?" he asked while smartly not moving his head.

"Ree!" Sylphie promptly answered very accurately.

"An entire month, huh?" Uncle said, raising his hand to give her the scratches.

Sylphie liked the scratchies.

"But you need to be a bit careful if you wanna go to Nevermore," Uncle reminded Sylphie.

“Ree! Ree!” Sylphie complained as she had, of course, known. Big Bird had reminded her. Sylphie considered pecking the scratching hand for his wrongness, but she allowed him to continue. She was really nice like that.

“Of course you knew,” he correctly corrected and scratched her under her chin. That was the best spot, so Uncle must have truly realized he said dumb stuff.

Suddenly, he stopped and lowered his hand, making Sylphie prepare to tell him that it wasn’t okay as he spoke:

“What do you say to a little bit of sparring? I wanna test myself a bit and not just stand here in the middle of the sky.”

Sylphie looked down at Uncle for a moment. She considered but then realized something. If Uncle used that...

“Ree?”

“No... I won’t try to hit you with my cauldron; why would I even-”

“Ree!” Sylphie thus issued her challenge.

Uncle was truly underestimating her by not even using his ultimate weapon!

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Chapter 597: A Childish Apocalypse

Sylphie released a challenging screech as Jake smiled in response. Fighting in Haven was naturally a no-go, so they would have to head somewhere else.

“Find a cloud island?” Jake asked the bird, getting an approving screech as she pointed with her wing toward a spot in the sky. Jake narrowed his eyes as he looked that way, and after squinting a bit and piercing through a few normal clouds, he did indeed see a large cloud island. It was only after he nodded at Sylphie that he realized what he had just done.

The island was thousands of kilometers above them and hidden behind several layers of normal clouds and the usual interference caused by environmental mana. Usually, trying to see really far was made blurry simply due to the mana in the air, but with enough Perception, one could still see clearly.

Perception has once more been proven the ultimate stat, Jake told himself as he and Sylphie took to the air. He summoned his wings and began flying and quickly noticed Sylphie getting annoyed at his low speed. Before Jake had a chance to switch to One Step to go faster, he felt the wind at his back.

Not a slight breeze either...

His wings caught the constant buffeting of winds, propelling him forward as Sylphie flew alongside him. The entire area around him had a light tinge of green to it, and Jake felt the intense mana at work as Sylphie used her magic.

This type of flying was still slower than Jake using One Step repeatedly, but it was far more relaxing as the wind just carried them forward. Sylphie also looked like it didn't bother her at all to use the skill if it even was a skill and not just some magic. Jake truly wasn't sure what Sylphie was capable of, which was another reason he wanted this sparring match.

He and Villy had gone over it earlier, but Nevermore had different sections. Dungeons for solo fighters and parties both, with the best approach being to do both. For the party dungeon, parties were mandatory, and while it was possible to just bring four weak people for one person to try and do it alone, it would undoubtedly result in a worse outcome than if it had been a full party of powerful individuals.

With that in mind, Jake wanted to collect a party of five. Sylphie was naturally on his list of candidates, but he wanted to test her first to see if she was truly up to the challenge. While he did want to do Nevermore with her, he wouldn't take her along just for the sake of it. If she proved too weak, she couldn't go, and he would take this approach with every candidate he had in mind.

From Earth, he also had three other candidates in mind besides Sylphie. Two of which he felt like he had tested enough already to have along. He was naturally talking about the Sword Saint and the Fallen King, both of which were utter powerhouses of their own.

Lastly, he had Carmen in mind. If possible, Jake would actually have preferred to ask Eron as he wanted a healer, but he was gone as far as Jake could tell. There was also the issue of trust, of course. His only worry with Carmen was that she wouldn't be able to keep up. He could only know after having a bout with her. The actual fighting kind.

But first, he had a murder bird to duel.

Not soon after, they reached their destination, still finding themselves within the non-restricted zone... which is when Jake finally noted something.

Sylphie was not at all affected by the restrictions a C-grade would usually be under. Jake frowned a bit and wondered why this was, but he knew asking her would be

useless. Was it because she was born on Earth? Because she had grown to that level of power all on her own? Some other reason?

Humans weren't tossed out either, so maybe it was all linked to those special items beasts consumed. Oh well, it didn't really matter.

What mattered was the upcoming duel.

Landing on the cloud island, Sylphie simply stood perched in the air a dozen or so meters in front of him.

"Sylphie, no need to hold back too much, okay? This will help determine if you are allowed to come along to Nevermore," Jake made clear.

"Ree!?" Sylphie asked, offended by Jake even daring to question her awesomeness.

"I know you are awesome, but the point is for you to show me that awesomeness for me to tell the other potential party members of the awesome stuff you can do," Jake smirked. He opened his hand as a bow appeared in it, and faint wisps of arcane mana began to appear from his body.

"Also, I am not entirely sure just *how* awesome you are. Maybe you are only a little awesome. So, are you rea-

An explosion of wind sent Jake flying backward as the small hawk made the first move. Instantly, Jake felt that the environment changed, the wind picked up, and a slight tinge of green was seen here and there whenever a powerful gust appeared. He also knew that if he had still been D-grade, small cuts would now be covering his exposed skin, thus forcing him to use Scales.

Not that easy.

No Scales were needed this time around as Jake tanked the wind easily, preparing to face what was next. The wind gathered at several points and condensed into crescent shapes that flew toward him, trying to cut him into pieces.

One Step gave him distance as Jake retaliated. He nocked an arrow and released it, feeling how much faster he was than before. The speed of the arrow was also incomparable to before, splitting the wind as it headed for the green hawk. Jake also came to learn about his new Unblemished Arrows quite a bit earlier than expected.

The arrow seemed to ignore the wind for the most part while in flight, much to the annoyance of Sylphie as she tried and failed to blow it away with a gust of wind. Instead, she had to dodge to the side while gathering even more magic.

Jake looked on as he decided to also let a bit loose himself. He felt the power boil inside of him as he unleashed some. A blast of arcane energy pushed away the wind around him as more than a hundred bolts formed instantly, taking barely any effort. Jake raised his hand and pointed towards Sylphie, releasing all of them at once.

The sky itself moved as a barrier of wind formed and effortlessly blocked the many bolts as they all blew up in mid-air. A large part of the cloud continent was annihilated as Jake was still getting a handle on his newfound power and hadn't quite gotten the balance down yet, making the explosions larger and less dense than intended.

Returning to his bow, he continued to open fire as Sylphie dodged or blocked them all easily, not really sending anything in return. She gave him a taunting look due to his inability to hit her. If she wanted it that way, fine with him.

"Gonna pick up the pace a bit!"

Narrowing his eyes, Jake focused. He nocked another arrow and fired, with Sylphie tauntingly trying to dodge it again, only for it to curve and fly straight into her trajectory, forcing the hawk to do a last-second dodge that still resulted in a few feathers getting blasted off.

Jake was far from done as several more came, all curved and all predicting her movements. Sylphie literally had her feathers ruffled as she decided to go on the offensive and not just take the barrage.

Before, Sylphie had only released attacks by condensing wind mana and firing it off. This time, she took a far more personal approach and deployed a familiar skill. Her wing began to glow green as she whipped it towards Jake, releasing a crescent wave of green wind energy. It left a faint outline of a wing in its wake, and upon seeing it, Jake knew it would be wisest to dodge.

He used One Step to get out of the way, only to see the green wind blade be pushed by the wind to follow after him. As he prepared to step down again, he saw a second blade be released. Followed by a third and a fourth in rapid succession.

Each blade was pushed forward by the wind, aimed towards him as a slight breeze seemed to be able to affect them. They circled him and came from different directions, but Sylphie clearly wasn't that good at control quite yet.

Jake dodged the first and teleported away to avoid the second. The two remaining blades turned in the air, but Jake twisted his body and released a Splitting Arrow towards Sylphie. The small bird dodged, but as she was too busy reacting to Jake, she failed to control her wind blades and allowed Jake to create even more distance and pressure her instead as he bombarded her with arrows.

Lack of Willpower. Intelligence stat seems high. Wisdom potentially low. Agility is definitely the highest stat, Jake quickly assessed. This was as much a test as it was a fight, and he had quite a few things he wanted to make sure of.

He knew Sylphie had great offensive power, but she had always struck Jake as lacking defensively. Small bodies tended to result in more susceptibility to damage, and while she was fast and had some defensive skills, she was still limited as far as Jake could see. Dodging was all fine and good until someone had a way to make that an unfeasible option.

Someone like Jake.

A part of him didn't want to hurt Sylphie, but he felt like it would be disrespectful to hold back. Besides, she was a C-grade, and he knew he had no attack she couldn't survive.

Sylphie dodged several more of his arrows, and he felt her get a bit cocky. Her wind blades were scarce, and Jake took aim as he began charging his Arcane Powershot. The air shuddered, and the wind all around him was pushed away or destroyed by the arcane energy that exploded out of his body.

The small hawk saw this and countered with her own large blade of wind. At least she tried to. At the very moment she was about to whip her wing to send it out, Jake attacked. Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, her mobility nullified for a moment as the Arcane Powershot was loosed.

Jake did not know what he had expected to happen next. At the very least, some kind of defensive barrier... but instead, a large gust of wind pushed the frozen Sylphie out of the way of the arrow, just in time as it only faintly scratched her.

Not yet.

He stepped down, refusing to not take advantage of the opening. Once Sylphie unfroze, she would need a moment to stabilize, and that would be a chance. Teleporting forward, a gust of wind came to attack him, but it only allowed Jake to further monopolize.

A shadow emerged, dodging to the side with a bow. Jake himself charged straight towards the hawk that had not become able to move again. He saw her confusion from seeing two Jakes, and she chose to dodge the arrow and not the shadow. A mistake from Jake's point of view.

She dodged, and at that moment, Jake pushed himself a bit further. Power welled up from within as he flew forward, and her eyes locked on him at the very last moment.

The katar hit flesh, Sylphie too late to dodge. Jake felt it penetrate feathers, breaking bones, and then...

His arm continued forward as Sylphie's body exploded. Jake was momentarily alarmed until he saw the pieces of flesh, bone, and feathers turn into a light green wind. The wind moved far faster than anything the hawk had done before and flew around him in a circle. The dozens of small wisps of green wind coalesced behind him, forming the faint outline of a hawk, and Jake's danger sense exploded as he barely managed to dodge a lethal blow in time.

The wind turned tangible as a green hawk flew by him, a gush of blood flying out of his side as a wing still cut him during her fly-by. Sylphie turned in the air again and went for a second attack. Jake met her head-on and stabbed forward, but the second his blade hit her, she once more exploded into a pure green wind that whisked over him, leaving several deep cuts on his limbs.

Once more, the wind collected, turning into Sylphie. Jake turned slowly to see her smug look. He raised his hand and pointed, firing a small beam of arcane energy. Sylphie didn't even move but just turned a part of her body into air as it flew straight through her.

"That's new?" Jake commented.

"Ree!" Sylphie confirmed proudly.

"Well then," Jake smiled in response. "Doesn't that mean you are quite a tricky one now?"

"Ree!" Sylphie kept being smug.

"That's good," Jake nodded slowly. "That's very good."

He looked at Sylphie, who seemed to realize what he was getting at and quickly began making some distance as the wind condensed around her.

"That means I no longer have to hold back."

Multiple reports came in at once, and she got a message from Arthur within minutes to check in and see if everything was okay.

"Ms. Wells, I have gotten many distress signals, have some beasts managed to attack Haven or is anyone else attacking-"

"No... everything is fine. It is just two children having a squabble," Miranda sighed. "Calm your followers and let them know it is under control."

"When you say children..." Arthur asked inquisitively after a short pause.

Miranda just gave him a small smile. "Very dangerous children. One of them the world-leading kind."

“Why would-“

“Why indeed,” Miranda shook her head as she interrupted the man. “Anyway, if there isn’t more, I have to make sure no idiots decide to try and get closer and check it out only to see themselves killed by some wayward blow.”

“Very well,” Arthur nodded. He hesitated for a bit before adding on: “I am beginning to understand the... difficulty of your position.”

She waved him off and cut the connection.

Looking at the reports of the nearby apocalypse, it at least looked like the newly-evolved Jake had fun with Sylphie.

A giant tornado that was nearly a hundred kilometers tall in the middle of the sky, wayward explosive attacks ravaging the desolate plains below, an arrow that blew off the top of a mountain, and auras more powerful than anyone else had felt before.

C-grades were not allowed within the area humans usually occupied. The energy from their fights didn’t even reach the human settlements, and no one outside of the absolute top ever dealt with beasts of that grade.

To the average person – which was still no more than E-grade – what was happening did indeed look and feel like an apocalypse. C-grade was considered the grade where one truly entered the higher echelons. A powerful C-grade could conquer a smaller planet, and most planet leaders spread throughout the multiverse, even those from major factions, were C-grade. Of course, this assumed that the planets could house C-grades, to begin with. The reality was that most planets had no real life on them, and even many of the planets with intelligent life had no interactions at all with the rest of the multiverse. To these, a D-grade was more than enough to be in charge, though it was rare they could have more than a small country. Of course, all this relied on the size of the planet too.

The point is, C-grades were rare, even from a multiversal perspective. Seeing C-grades fight was something most would never experience. To have front-row seats were even less of a thing, especially not outside of preset arenas and tournaments.

So what the hell had Jake and Sylphie expected to happen when they decided to fight only a few thousand kilometers from Haven and still close to several other settlements? Sylphie could be excused. She was only a few years old, but Jake? Jake was... well... Jake.

At least no one has died to a random missed arrow...

Just then, another new report came in about a large explosion in the sky that could be felt thousands of kilometers away.

Yet...

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Chapter 598: A Wise Choice In Retrospect

In the sky, there had once been a cloud island. It had been quite large, too, with a few elementals spawning here and there. Using past tense was very important in this case, as now there was no island to be seen anywhere. It turned out that clouds and giant tornadoes did not mix well. Or, well, it could be said they mixed really well, considering how the entire cloud island had been swept up, and Sylphie tried to use all the cloud mana to amplify her own attack.

It hadn't worked, but it was a nice attempt. In fact, their fight was constantly marred by the same thing: not much working for either side. Jake could not deal any significant damage to Sylphie due to her newfound ability to be half-ethereal and turn into wind at will, and while Sylphie did have attacks more than capable of dealing severe damage to Jake, actually hitting him was another story. What few chances she did get, she ended up abandoning or dodging as Jake happily countered. After the first use of Eternal Shadow, she didn't retry.

Neither had been fully serious and gone all-out, or the outcome would have been different. If Sylphie was willing to take a few blows to land one on Jake, it could get dangerous for him, and if Jake began to use poisons, it would get dangerous for Sylphie. Ultimately, the likely outcome of their fighting would be Sylphie retreating or losing, something she realized, much to her annoyance. At least Jake saw her occasional pecking as a sign of annoyance.

"Hey, it was a good workout," Jake smiled as he slowly flew through the air back toward Haven, with Sylphie refusing to fly herself. She was a bit tired too, which was another difference between them. Jake could last far longer in a fight, and he didn't waste as much energy with his attacks. Sylphie had a large mana pool, and her wind attacks didn't seem to cost much mana, but that was just her normal wind magic. Her attacks using her physical body were large and flashy, which ended up still consuming a lot.

More than that, it took a lot to turn herself into wind and become corporeal again. Something she did perhaps a bit too much as she loved showing it off.

"Ree!" Sylphie complained with another peck.

"If you wanted to win, you should have come for me before I also evolved," Jake teased her.

"Ree! Ree!"

"True, that would have been very not-nice," Jake nodded, his slight head movement making her peck him again. It didn't actually hurt; he just smiled and stopped himself from shaking his head at the bird's antics.

To conclude their fight, Jake had decided Sylphie was more than fine to bring along to Nevermore. She was by far the strongest C-grade Jake had ever met for her level, and she also didn't seem to have any large weaknesses. Her magic was limited, yes, but her wind magic was not simple at all. The green wind did things Jake could not quite understand, sometimes easily tearing through an arcane barrier and other times assisting or even healing Sylphie herself. It could even heal Jake a bit. Far from what an actual healer could do, but it was something that added to the mystery.

One thing that had made Jake apprehensive was her lack of survivability. She had a small frame, and he was sure that a mega-dungeon like Nevermore would have enemy types capable of locking her down. To know that she could turn herself into wind at will and that destroying her body didn't actually matter much to the small hawk had alleviated nearly all of these worries. Jake was honestly not confident in being able to kill Sylphie even if he tried, and she decided to run away. As for her offensive prowess... it was there. Her charges were capable of tearing Jake apart if he wasn't fast enough at dodging, and even her area of effect magic was impressive.

Now he just needed to confirm with three more, and he would have a full party for Nevermore. Jake already knew the King had evolved to C-grade like him, so that shouldn't be an issue level-wise, but the Sword Saint and Carmen were both unknowns. This was why Jake was heading back to Haven to talk to Miranda and have her check in with them. Also, it was an excuse to delay going to Arnold.

Getting back did not take long, and he headed straight for her office. Ten minutes of scolding with Jake and Sylphie both getting an earful later, and Jake got an update on what the other major characters of Earth had been up to. Firstly, she told him the King had evolved the very same day he had, likely within the same hour, making Jake know he would also get some snide remarks from the Unique Lifeform about how he had delayed the King's evolution.

Secondly, the Sword Saint had yet to evolve but was working on something himself. Hearing that gave Jake mixed feelings as he hoped for the old man to evolve soon so they could go to Nevermore together, but it also felt nice to know Jake had evolved first.

Thirdly was Carmen. She had not evolved either, but was killing a lot of things and "figuring stuff out" the last Miranda had heard, which was about four days ago. That one

was kind of expected, as she had fallen a bit behind after the whole Ell'Hakan thing and the actions of Valhal during it.

After getting his update, Jake prepared to head over to Arnold to check in about the Nanoblade and if he had any other projects Jake could take advantage of now that he was evolved. However, what Miranda said next made him stop.

"Arnold contacted me right around the time you and Sylphie decided to create widespread panic, mentioning that you forgot to leave the materials you promised to bring him the last time you visited," Miranda said nonchalantly.

Jake stopped abruptly halfway out the door and searched his necklace. He quickly found the list.

"Shit."

"...You forgot?" Miranda said a bit judgmentally.

"In my defense, I promised him like... decades ago," Jake said, trying to use his time-dilated training session as an excuse.

"So you are even more overdue than I first thought?" Miranda teased him back. "Be happy it wasn't a loan with late fees."

"Yeah, yeah," Jake waved her off. "Hey, Sylphie, it seems like I am going to the Order first anyway. Wanna come along?"

"Ree!"

"Fair," Jake shrugged at her refusal. "Just don't go and level too much. You need to be below 210 for the event at Nevermore. The lower, the better."

"Ree?"

"Yeah, working on your skills seems like a good idea," he approved. Sylphie seemed full of determination as she jumped off his head and flew out a nearby window.

"I will admit... I still don't understand how you can interpret anything from those screeches," Miranda said with furrowed brows. "It seems utterly unrelated to the translation skill."

"Eh, I think we had this talk before? It isn't really words but more about intent or something like that. I dunno, but I get it. Other beasts do too, you know, so it isn't that big of a deal," Jake shrugged unbothered.

“That says more about you than me,” Miranda smiled and shook her head. “Also, it is a bit late, but congratulations on your evolution. Looks like you... didn’t change at all. Not even your height.”

“How about my face?” Jake asked after taking his mask off. He hadn’t noticed anything himself, but maybe Miranda would?

“No... the same. Maybe a few minor things are ironed out? I honestly don’t know. You are the person I know who changes the least. Well, besides maybe Arnold...”

“Hey, why change perfection?” Jake smirked. “Anyway, I should get going back to the Order and pick up the stuff for Arnold. Might be a bit as I have some other stuff to handle too while I am there.”

With that, Jake made his way back to the lodge and down to the laboratory below. He honestly felt a bit bad about having commissioned it, considering how little he used it. He had planned for it before he knew about the whole mansion ordeal at the Order, so at least he had an excuse there.

Down there, Jake began setting up the formation that would allow him to teleport to the Order. He could just go to the Mangrove and use the main one, but he wanted to place one back in Haven anyway. Unsurprisingly, it was far easier to set up now that he was C-grade. In fact, everything just felt easier. His energy moved more fluidly, his mana felt denser and more potent, and his head was clearer than ever.

After he had set the formation up, he activated it, and a quick trip through the void placed him back on the grass outside of his mansion in the first universe.

“The prodigal son returns, now a true elite of the multiverse,” a voice said behind him a second or so later.

“Hey, Villy,” Jake said as he turned to regard the god. He had wondered if he could see something “more” about the Primordial with his evolved Bloodline, but sadly it was just the same old. His instincts still just made it utterly clear that the god was at a level of power so far beyond him it wasn’t even worth considering countermeasures.

“So, how does it feel? To undergo yet another metamorphosis and get closer to truly shredding your mortal coil?” Villy said.

“Normal?” Jake said. “It doesn’t feel different than any prior evolutions, outside of this one being the most potent yet. But I assume that is only to be expected.”

“For you, perhaps it is to be expected, but in the multiverse, C-grade is quite the barrier, and reaching it is a point of pride,” the Viper said. “C-grade is when life truly begins for most beasts. It was when I, for the very first time, had true intelligence. When most monsters for the first time experience sapience. By now, the Path is mostly set, and

what they have going for them now is what they will use to eventually grasp for godhood. Their foundation is built, and it is now time to create a pillar that will stand eternally. So, do you feel confident in the Path that you have chosen? That it is one that will allow you to reach the apex?"

Jake just smiled and shook his head. "Nothing has changed on that front either. Why wouldn't I be confident? Since day one, it has been godhood or death, and dying seems like the worse of those options."

"Confidence is indeed a qualifier, but so is the mindset. To become immortal is not just about power but being the right kind of person to live that long without going insane. Even your current grade is a challenge to some. Do you know what the lifespan is for C-grades?" Villy asked.

"No," Jake confessed. "Not the maximum anyway. I read C-grade humans tend to live well into the tens of thousands?"

"Ten thousand is the natural lifespan for humans, before other modifiers, like the Vitality stat, increasing it a bit," Villy clarified. "The maximum lifespan for a C-grade is ten times that or a hundred thousand years. Of course, to reach this lifespan, you will need some natural treasures, alchemical goods, or to just be a race that lives this long naturally. For reference, elves naturally live about five times longer than humans on the average but are, of course, still limited to a hundred thousand years total."

"Ten thousand years," Jake muttered. "Nearly taking a hundred to reach C-grade doesn't seem that bad, then."

"Not a sprint, it's a marathon, bla bla bla, you know the deal," the Viper waved it off. "I just wanted to come by and congratulate you. Also, to try and see if I can feel anything when up close... and nothing. You still give off the aura of a perfectly average human. Bar the Bloodline, of course."

"Good to know," Jake said, feeling a bit relieved.

"You are here for the bee ritual, right?" the Viper asked after a bit.

"Actually, I am here to get some stuff for Arnold, but also tending to the ritual was the plan," Jake confirmed. "Why, are you curious about what will happen?"

"Yes," the Viper said, not a hint of jest. "I genuinely am. You see, the Sylphian Hawk I could write off as a fluke, as it also included my own Records. It was an odd amalgamation of energy that helped give birth to her, so I could write it off as something non-replicable. Then Eternal Hunger. Followed by Sandy. Those two did still rely on natural treasures with powerful innate energies, but they were still mostly you. Finally, we have the fact that you managed to even change your own race into something more

than human. Everything indicates that influencing these evolutions is something you can do at least semi-intentionally.”

“Yeah... about that...” Jake said as he began to explain the deal with his profession evolving. More specifically, he told Villy about the Harbinger of Primeval Origins evolution option, including the fact it gave the maximum number of stats and the full description.

Jake knew there were many hints of potential alchemical applications in that evolution option, and who was better to ask than Villy? More than that, to hear if there were any pitfalls. Read complete version only at *novel•fire•met*

The more Jake explained the profession, the more the Viper frowned and the deeper in thought he seemed to be. After Jake was done talking, the Viper took a deep breath.

“First of all, good you didn’t pick it,” the Viper said. “Not just because it would be a very sudden shift in your Path that could be problematic, but because it seemed *too* good. Harbinger is an incredibly specific word to be used in this context and often refers to an innate inevitability. I do think that your assertion it would be mostly uncontrolled is correct, and you would have seen passive skills that would influence the world around you, intentionally or not. Moreover, it could influence you to walk down a Path that you do not intend. Also... if you picked it, you probably shouldn’t have ever gone to the Order or Nevermore.”

“Wait, why?” Jake asked with a frown.

“Think for a bit. What do you think would happen if anyone found out that you are a passive wellspring of powerful evolutions. What if another human who is about to reach C-grade experiences what you did? A sudden discovery of a human variant? People would put two and two together, and soon enough, you will find yourself in quite a pickle. Being my Chosen, perhaps some will hesitate to force you, but at the very least, you will have people flocking around you at all times to benefit from your presence. This all assumes that being the Harbinger of Primeval Origins is a good thing in every instance. What if you can influence people towards an Origin that is less than ideal? Spawn things that are best never seen? If that happens, it may be decided leaving you alive is too dangerous, and there are pacts I am a part of that could compel me to take action. If your very existence was deemed a threat to the multiverse, I would have to kill you myself,” Villy explained, outlining quite a few potential issues Jake had not considered.

“Ah, not to say you shouldn’t aim to become an existence that endangers every other lifeform in the multiverse,” Villy smirked as he added. “You should just do it intentionally and only make people aware of the danger you pose once you are strong enough to make those threats a reality.”

“Noted,” Jake said after considering the words for a while. “Another reason not to pick it is also that it would make you sad I no longer wanted to do alchemy with you, right?”

“You could probably still do some alchemy, but sure, let’s say that was one of the reasons,” the Viper waved him off. “I doubt the profession would have removed the Blessing either. Shit, it may even have rolled back some of the restrictions it placed on me, so at least I could take the Blessing back and wash my hands of you.”

“Ouch,” Jake said, acting hurt. “Anyway, since I am gonna work on the ritual, any tips?”

The Viper, seemingly happy with the change of subject, nodded. “Just one. Do it properly. Ectognamorph females are powerful by default, especially the Queens. If you spawn one at C-grade, you may even be able to make one that is....”

“One that is what?”

“Not saying anything more. Giving you advice is counter-productive, so I shall take my leave here. Again, my only advice is to do it properly and don’t half-arse it,” Villy said as he flashed a teasing smile before he disappeared.

“Didn’t plan on half-arsing it,” Jake muttered as he turned and looked towards the formation.

And... well, there was one downside to having a lot in the best stat...

It allowed him to see how many damn mistakes he had made in his D-grade incompetence.

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Chapter 599: Complicated Rituals & Annoying Issue

Setting up a ritual circle was a bit like making a painting, but in order to make the painting, you had to program every stroke using some illogical programming language that also, for some bloody reason, had to follow weird rules reminiscent of feng shui. Concepts had to play properly together, which could be likened to mixing colors to get the optimal palette. Some colors did not mesh well together, and if all colors mixed haphazardly, you would get a muddy brown. AKA, you would get shit.

All of this also had to be done while painting within the lines if one was following some pre-set ritual circle and trying to make a very specific image. Not following a pre-set ritual circle was far beyond anything Jake could do quite yet.

When Jake initially set up the ritual circle, all looked well. The colors were adequately separated, and things seemed to be meshing well. However, with a higher Perception stat, he could begin to see the flaws. This could be likened to seeing the borders where the different colors mixed. To the naked eye, perhaps it looked fine, but if digitalized and someone zoomed in and saw the individual pixels, small flaws could be spotted. A bit of color may have gone over a line, the intensity of a certain color may be off, or a faint shade darker in one place than another.

The problem is that any minor change would echo throughout the rest of the formation. To once more bring it back to the programming analogy, fixing one bug could create another. Jake slightly changing a shade of color could push some paint over a line at the opposite end of the formation, and if he messed with too many things, he could even end up ruining one of these lines altogether, making the entire ritual collapse.

All of this is to say that Jake's usual approach of just trial and error did not work with ritual circles. At least he did have the ritualism skill that gave him some ideas and faintly hinted at what he should do here and there while also giving warnings when he was about to do something dumb. It was far from enough, though, and there simply wasn't a ritualism skill with enough innate knowledge to make you a good ritualist. In the end, everything took time and practice, and luckily for Jake, he had some time for that while waiting for the others to be ready for Nevermore.

More than that, he had a library full of high-level books and someone, quite frankly, way-overqualified willing to teach him.

"Your analogy is good, but it still has some flaws. You cannot simply view a ritual circle as a two-dimensional creation but as something that functions in a mesh. It is part of a three-dimensional world and has to interact with it through catalysts and energy absorption. This even ignores the fact that this specific ritual interacts with an egg of a living creature possessing a soul, making it pass into the metaphysical," the old alchemist said after Jake voiced some of his thoughts.

It was naturally Duskleaf, someone more than happy with teaching Jake here and there. Though he did limit himself to basic things and did not want to comment directly on the ritual circle Jake had made for the Pollendust Bee Queen. At least not outside of the aspects that weren't considered basic.

"So, a 3D painting of sorts," Jake muttered to himself. "Though I am beginning to also run into some issues with the final energy infusion. I had not properly taken into account the qualitative difference in power between D and C-grade when making the ritual, and I fear it may be overloaded and fail at the final moment."

“To redraw the lines of a circle is entirely possible, but you have to delve beneath the paint. Remember, you are working in far more than two dimensions. You view it only from one direction and not as a mesh where you can focus on small singular aspects, even if one looks to be covered by other. The surrounding constructs will need to be stabilized before the redrawing, and adaptation of the paint is necessary afterward, but I believe you are more than able.”

Jake thought for a while before opening his palm and making an outline of the ritual circle. He studied it for a while before shaking his head.

“It just all feels so interconnected,” Jake complained. “Stabilizing certain elements with my arcane affinity does seem doable, but controlling this stabilization while also redrawing seems bloody hard.”

“It is,” Duskleaf smiled. “Ritualism and formation, in general, are not simple. Formation masters can spend lifetimes creating and mastering a single formation. I know that usually, the circles you make are simply following a blueprint, but this is different. Hm... to use your analogy, then usually you are just acting like a printer and not actually doing any proper painting yourself, while now you need to pick up the brush yourself. You do have it a bit easier as this ritual is still based on a well-studied one, but that also means the changes you make need to be well-thought-out.”

About now, Jake also had some more context on the difference between all the terms. Ritual circles, magic circles, and formations in particular.

Ritual circles were, on average, considered very conceptual in nature. They relied more on traits of mysticism and leaned into a lot of what Jake called system-fuckery to work. These rituals also nearly always dealt solely with energy and not really with anything else. This meant they, in most cases, needed an active caster, and if the caster died, the ritual would cease to be. The main guiding energy of a ritual was thus nearly always the caster or casters who would actively participate for it to work. More than that, rituals were often considered shorter endeavors and not long-term installations. They were created with a purpose, and once the ritual was done, they would fade.

Formations leaned more into math. They were highly calculated creations that were more like a grand circuit board made to run one specific computer program. They could activate autonomously, be self-controlled, and the really high-level formations were even capable of showing AI-like behavior. More importantly, they did not necessarily require a controller but could function purely off external energy sources. In fact, if the creator had to actively use any energy to make it work after its completion, it was a sign of a poorly made formation. Even if the original creator died, as long as the formation was maintained over time, it could remain active nearly indefinitely.

This did mean that, on average, formations were seen far more often in the multiverse. Arrays that helped defend cities were just another form of formation. The teleportation circles made to allow travel were also just formations.

Ultimately, these two could never truly be separated. A ritual would always have traits of a formation, and a formation would nearly always have aspects of a ritual. To call one more complicated than the other also wouldn't be right, as it often depended on the person what they found harder. Both could also just be considered magic circles.

Honestly, the terminology was all mixed up, and some used the two interchangeably. Even the system changed between them at times, seemingly viewing them as very much the same. The only reason they were separated as they were was because of just how damn complicated formations and rituals were. Miranda could call herself a great ritualist but not quite a formation expert. Neil was just the opposite. So if both called themselves magic circle experts, it would just lead to confusion.

Anyway, that was a quick summary of what Jake had been forced into reading way too many books about. This was even without mentioning all the researchers arguing about it and their different hot takes.

For Jake, hardcore formation theory was the worst. He was way more of a ritual guy himself, as he liked the control they required. Duskleaf also agreed that he should know when to limit himself. While having some breadth was a good thing in alchemy, he would learn enough about formations simply by trying to get better at rituals.

Not to misunderstand that Jake couldn't do math. He was just more the kind of guy who liked math with numbers, while formations were all about that high-level math that wasn't even real math. Real math had numbers, not letters, and yes, he had fought with Casper about that several times. Speaking of Casper... that dude was one of the few who truly did do both rituals and formations to a very high level. Jake hoped he was doing well and to meet too.

Regarding Jake and rituals, Duskleaf seemed extremely keen on convincing Jake to study curse rituals more, primarily due to Eternal Hunger. The old alchemist god had some good points, including how he could use the weapon as a powerful catalyst to do some amazing things, especially as the weapon was linked to his soul. Worth considering, but later. For now, it was all about the bee ritual.

Jake and Duskleaf had only been at the bee ritual for about half a day when someone else also returned to the mansion. Someone who had been quite busy herself.

"Lord Thayne, congratulations on your evolution," Meira said with a bow as soon as she exited the mansion upon noticing him and Duskleaf outside.

"Thank you," Jake said with a smile, adding on. "You are fast approaching C-grade yourself too. Ah, but one warning. You have to, at the very least, attempt to officially join the Order *before* evolving, okay? Of course, I am also open to alternatives, but the status quo will change."

He had not really talked to her about it during his last visit, but Meira had picked up even more classes on her own. Jake had kind of expected it, but more just that she would continue down the Path they had talked about. Seeing her take the initiative and pick up entirely new topics was only a positive and only more proof she was more than ready. Based on what Duskleaf had said, she was also skilled enough by now to join. Jake wasn't entirely sure what her hang-ups were, but he felt like he had to set a deadline.

Meira did look a bit taken aback at Jake forcing the issue. She looked to Duskleaf, but the old alchemist just smiled in response.

"If you have any concerns, just ask me," Jake said with a shrug.

"I will," Meira said after a moment of hesitation. "I apologize for disturbing Lord Thayne and the Grand Elder and shall return to my studies."

With a bow, she left towards her own residence, walking at quite a brisk pace.

"I don't get it," Jake muttered to himself.

"What is there not to get?" Duskleaf asked.

"Shouldn't joining the Order be something she wants? I also know that she has the opportunity to go to the Altmar Empire. Both must be better than being a slave here," Jake voiced his thoughts.

"Hmph," Duskleaf scoffed and shook his head. "You truly are clueless. While this may be overstepping, and I am usually not a fan of getting involved in personal business, I guess I have no choice. First of all, you view her as far more naïve than she is. She is still a D-grade and isn't stupid. She knows the benefits her current station brings. Just look at her. Unlimited lessons, me teaching her, and this mansion to live in with you, someone who does not care at all what she does. The only negative is her status as a slave, but considering that is never used against her, all she truly lost is her own sense of pride from not being free in principle. For someone who has never truly been free, that is not a demerit at all."

"That," Jake said after thinking a bit, "makes sense."

"I am not saying for you to change anything, but if you want to convince her the status quo has to, a conversation is needed. If not, it will be nothing more than a punishment. To you, perhaps freedom is the ultimate prize, but for her, it has never held any understandable value."

"But who ever said her not being a slave would change anything besides her status?" Jake argued.

"Who says it won't? As a slave, she is tied to you. She has some kind of connection with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I am only here because of you. If she is no longer your slave, then what is she? A random D-grade elf member of the Order that you used to know. What she has right now is good, and the unknown is always frightening. She doesn't know what will happen. Also, can you truly tell me nothing would change? Tell me, where did you expect her to live once she became a member of the Order?"

"Well... every member of the Order gets their own place..." Jake said, but he instantly saw the issue there.

"Which to most is nice, but to her a bad thing when she wants to stay where she is," Duskleaf said. "Granted, if you make this an issue is still your own decision. Ultimately, you could just kick her out at any time if you wanted to. While the girl isn't horrible, she is far from a genius, and if separated from you, I see a difficult future for her, but that isn't your concern. Right now, she is taking advantage of you due to the circumstances both of you unintentionally found yourselves in, and you truly don't have any obligations to her. But from what I gather, you do feel responsible, so you have to do something to make her want to change the status quo."

"So, what is your advice?" Jake asked, a bit unsure what the god was getting at. Clearly, Duskleaf was not just mentioning this for nothing. Or maybe he had just gotten annoyed at Jake being oblivious... both were entirely possible.

"Make a decision and tell her. From my understanding, you want to no longer have her as your slave, so assuming that is a given, tell her what will come next. Whatever rules or norms may exist don't matter to you. If you want her to remain here working for you, simply hire her as an attendant, making the status quo unchanged despite her change in status. If you don't want her around, tell her that. If you want to be rid of her entirely because she now knows your secrets, kill her or make her sign a contract," Duskleaf said. "The only important thing is actually sitting down with her and talking about it. Make it so her future is not a feared unknown but has some element of certainty."

"It just feels like me deciding what will happen goes against the entire point of me doing this. I want her to want to be free and to make decisions herself. If I just tell her how things will be..." Jake muttered.

"Then explain that to her too. In some ways, you fail to realize that she has actively made her choice already. She wants to become someone you want to keep around and is useful to you for purely selfish reasons. You are the Chosen of a Primordial, Jake. If you decided to recruit slaves tomorrow, there would be a line halfway across the planet. The two of you will never be equals, and I doubt you can ever make her truly see you as an equal, no matter how much you may want that," Duskleaf shook his head.

"Yeah..." Jake said with a sigh. "You do have some good points; I guess I should have a proper sit-down with her and decide on what the future holds. In all fairness, I am fine

with whatever she wants to do. I do kind of need an attendant in the Order to do things for me, and it may as well be her, right?”

“All up to you,” Duskleaf smiled. “I do like the girl as a student. She picks up on things quickly, and being in your presence will for sure keep benefitting her. Her talent is growing by the day, and if she keeps up her current dedication, she could go far. Right now, her primary motivator is to remain useful to you, and I doubt that will change if you keep her around, but that is honestly not a bad thing. The system at least doesn’t care, as long as she remains consistent in her Path.”

Jake nodded along. “Got it. I will talk to her about it and try to figure out what she wants. I still hope that some part of her wants freedom and to, at the very least, be able to leave if she wants to. It isn’t like either of us wanted to be in this situation originally, and she must carry at least some level of resentment towards me as the Order enslaved her, so who knows?”

“That is the final part you don’t get,” Duskleaf shook his head. “She clearly likes you, Jake. Not you as the Chosen, but you as a person. I would not say her emotions pass into love, but it is similar. For this, I will not say anything; that is up for you young ones to figure out yourselves. Just know she doesn’t solely remain around you due to the benefits you bring.”

Jake didn’t say anything but just looked at the god. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel* ♦ *fire* ♦ *net*

“You did know,” Duskleaf realized. “More to consider, then. I will go get some tea while you sort your thoughts.”

With that, Duskleaf disappeared with the clone that was made from a plant that couldn’t even consume tea, as far as Jake knew.

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Chapter 600: Experiments Requiring Varying Degrees of Violence

Jake had a lot to think about. Annoying things to think about.

He knew he wasn’t the most moral of people, considering his rather liberal approach to killing. He did not hesitate when he went out into the world and hunted down sapient C-grade beasts simply for experience points, and he had killed plenty of other humans

during his Path so far. Some were more deserving than others, with quite a few just being at the wrong place at the wrong time or having chosen to trust someone they really shouldn't have.

But that didn't mean he was entirely amoral, and he had some things he wouldn't do. Likely due to his upbringing and the culture of Earth and because, quite honestly, these things had nothing to do with his Path. They were unrelated to his goals. One of those things he wouldn't do was use his position to take advantage of others. It just felt icky and wrong to him to even consider it.

Miranda, Meira, pretty much anyone in the Order... it just felt wrong to even consider any kind of relationship that was more than friends. Meira more than anyone else. He had watched enough movies to know she may feel attached or something due to not being treated like shit, which just made it even slimier.

Perhaps more importantly than anything else, Jake didn't want any romantic relationships. At least nothing serious. It didn't even have to do with his bad prior experiences anymore, but just that he didn't have time and didn't want to dedicate the necessary mental energy to it.

Jake had already talked a lot with Caleb and how he struggled with balancing family and his role as Judge of the Court of Shadows. Caleb did not regret his way of life, and if he had to choose between the Court and his family, he would pick family every time. Jake could honestly not say he was the same. In other words, he would be a shitty partner.

There was also the entire thing about his insane innate fear of betrayal, but that was a whole other can of worms he really didn't want to address.

In conclusion, Jake wanted to avoid relationships, and if acting oblivious made that easier, he would continue doing so. It was honestly just easier to never try and read more into anything others did, and he would rather assume people were being friendly and not make any conclusions. The result would be nothing happening, no matter what.

The whole thing with Meira was a complicated issue and one Jake was far from qualified to deal with. All he knew was that entertaining her emotions would be unhealthy for both of them. He could handle casual relationships, like the one with Carmen, but anything more would be too much.

These annoying emotions were a lot to deal with and, quite frankly, not worth the mental energy. Hence, he moved on to something far simpler:

The ritual circle.

It took him about a week to fix the most outrageous of issues with the ritual circle, and while there was still room for improvement, it wasn't anything important. All they really resulted in was the circle being less efficient and draining the many cores of energy

faster, with more energy going to waste, but Jake didn't really care overly much about that.

During this week, Jake tried to approach Meira to talk, but she seemed to try and avoid any long conversations as much as possible. At the very least, her actions allowed Jake to consider excuses to talk to her, which was when he handed her the list from Arnold that he had totally remembered. Having her do all that shopping and then confirming all the purchases afterward would be a perfect segue into the conversation he wanted to have with her. Get full chapters from novel•fire•net

Additionally, it set a deadline for Jake to get his act together. Luckily, it seemed like it would take a bit of time to get everything together as some of the things the scientist had asked for weren't readily available.

After the week of ritual circle work, Jake moved on to another important task. The improvement of cores. For this, Jake had the Advanced Core Manipulation skill, one of those skill choices Jake had semi-neglected but now felt more than happy about having picked.

[Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)] – To touch upon a core of pure energy and Records is to touch upon the broken shell of a soul. Allows the alchemist to far more easily manipulate cores and the Records within the broken soul shells with the goal of refining them. Refined cores will, in most cases, be more effective, and you can also choose to amplify certain effects. Having taken it further, you have learned that the layers of souls can be malleable in some circumstances, and applying this knowledge, you have learned to fuse cores containing similar Records and even change their nature in some circumstances as your own soul influences the core. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Advanced Core Manipulation based on Wisdom and Willpower.

The description wasn't something Jake had truly dwelled on much, but now that he read it after being offered the Harbinger of Primeval Origins profession and recent revelations about his ability to affect the Origin of something, he saw it in a new light.

This skill was all about manipulating the Records within a core. It even allowed him to merge several cores to create a more powerful one.

For the final push to evolve the Bee Queen to C-grade, Jake would need a few powerful natural treasures, but more importantly, a core of pure Records. Records that would allow him to improve this Origin somehow. Jake wasn't sure exactly how to do this yet, but luckily he had time.

Hatching the egg before Nevermore was a priority, but if he didn't manage to do it, that would be fine too. He wasn't in a rush and wanted to get this one right. As Villy had said, this would be Jake's first time intentionally trying to create some super variant using his Bloodline-related abilities.

While he didn't have a core yet, he would go get one after he practiced a bit with what he already had, as well as some cheaply bought cores. Insectoid monsters were far from rare, and getting the cores was easy and cheap. Compared to most beast cores, ectognacores were a dime a dozen, and from just clearing one hive, thousands, if not millions, could be obtained.

There was, of course, still a variance to them, and Jake did have some better variant versions. Like the Queen's Guard cores.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard Ectognacore (D-grade)] - An Ectognacore left behind by a D-grade Isoptera Queen's Guard, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs.

Jake did plan on heading back to Earth and making a visit to the termite hive to obtain more cores. More specifically, he wanted some C-grade cores from the Queen and to get some revenge on the Termite King. But that was only for when he was ready to actually use the cores.

Or really needed a break from doing alchemy.

For this core manipulation, Jake had wanted to ask Duskleaf for any tips, but the god had categorically refused and told Jake he was one hundred percent on his own. The intent was clear there: the two gods wanted to see what Jake could come up with himself without any feedback. He and Villy both wanted to see what exactly Jake would come up with through his reckless experimenting.

Not that Jake was against this as he got to work.

The Fallen King slowly lowered himself toward the white void as he observed the landscape before him. Ice covered everything, and he felt the intense mana in the air. What had the humans called this... the pole, he believed? An odd name, but the naming sense of humans often struck him as weird.

He took in the environment for a moment, and he felt slightly affected by it. The cold was so intense it required him to keep his barrier constantly active or risk his movements being affected, which bode well that he would find worthy prey. Flying inwards, the cold within the desert of ice and snow only intensified, and soon enough, he spotted movement in the distance.

An iceberg appeared to be moving as five bulky blocks were put together. One larger one with four smaller blocks functioning as feet, the entire body made of pure bluish ice. It was over five hundred meters tall, and the snow below it seemed to almost solidify as it walked.

[Northbound Ice Elemental – lvl 226]

Disappointment was the next emotion he felt. He had hoped for something better. 226 was low, but sometimes he had to take what he would get.

The King was not there to get levels. Not truly. He knew of Nevermore, the witch of Haven, having told him about it. He knew he had a level limit of 210 until the humans were ready, but he still wanted to test himself during this time. He wanted to properly understand his own power and the Path he walked.

As a Unique Lifeform, he had three forms of magic. Gold, Soul, and Force. Those were the three schools he practiced, and everything he could do was one of those three or a combination. Was this limiting? Perhaps, but with enough power, anything was possible, and the more he grew, the more he began to understand what he could do.

His issue with what he called Gold magic in D-grade was how much power it required to use. It was not actually related to metal but was just named for the color. In reality, it could be more closely compared to an arcane affinity, but naturally, Unique Lifeforms could not possess arcane affinities. They were born with their inborn magical powers, and that was all they had and would ever have.

Now that he was in C-grade, his energy had spiked. He had far more mana, and using his golden magic was finally more feasible.

Staring at the elemental, he began to condense the first type of magic he could now use. Force magic could be used as a form of telekinesis, and it allowed him to control objects directly or form constructs or waves of force. He would do the same now, but he could also introduce the power of gold.

Force and gold combined as a golden translucent barrier appeared. With his other hand, he attempted to create a spear, but he felt its weakness. Force magic and the concept of piercing never worked well together, as while focusing the power on a singular point seemed smart, it also made the construct incredibly fragile. No, better to go for more solid constructs.

His second try was far better. He allowed the energy to flow out of him, and he created a golden orb about a meter across. He slightly began to reform it and discovered that if he remained in contact with his construct through a constant stream of energy, it was far easier to control.

Turning his attention towards the elemental, he saw that it, too, had taken notice of him. There was little movement of life within the icy plains, making him stand out as his very presence disturbed the land. The elemental didn't seem keen on conversation as magic began gathering around it, and the King gladly responded.

With one hand, he sent the barrier of gold flying toward the elemental. It slammed into it with force capable of making mountains crumble, and the King followed up with the orb. Golden energy still extended to it as he swung it like a flail, slamming it into the side of

the huge C-grade in front of him. The impact lifted the living iceberg off the ground for a brief moment before the orb managed to pierce all the way through and go out the other side.

Adequate.

But with room for improvement.

The King considered the weapons of man. Swords, axes, spears... nothing quite fit him. Ah, but there was one that came to mind. A weapon he rarely saw people use but that the King believed would prove quite helpful.

Extending both his hands, golden forms grew from them. The golden energy extended out and formed two constructs resembling battle hammers, the heads made circular. He admired his weapons for a moment, but before he could use them, he annoyingly had to deal with a counterattack.

A giant blast of ice magic flew toward him, and the land itself seemed to rise in opposition to his presence. A singular golden bubble appeared around his body, and he allowed everything to impact him. The blast of ice energy washed over the barrier, turning the world blueish white, as a giant spike of ice pierced from below, but broke apart and shattered upon impacting the barrier.

The King never moved at all from the attacks.

With a thought, the defensive barrier expanded outwards, pushing away all the energy and allowing the King to go on the offensive. A single hammer flew out and grew in size while mid-air as it hit the elemental, sending it tumbling back with huge cracks covering its icy body. A second hammer came from above soon after, smashing the living icy mountain into the ground below, making the land itself crack and crumble from the impact.

Naturally, something like this was far from enough to actually kill a C-grade, and the elemental soon rose again, only to promptly get smashed down again by yet another hammer of golden force. The constructs made by the King were more durable than most equipment humans wielded, so even when the elemental tried to fight back by breaking the hammers, it failed spectacularly. While attacks on the hammers did drain the King's energy, he remained connected to them through a constant stream of golden energy.

To call these constructs some form of shaped barriers would be an accurate assessment. They were in essence simply barriers moved through powerful telekinetic force magic, allowing them to hit harder and faster than the vast majority of warriors wielding the weapon using their bodies.

After attacking the elemental for a while, the King stopped as he no longer saw a purpose in it. The C-grade ice elemental healed from the attacks nearly as fast as they came, the mana in the environment feeding it. Physical force would likely never be able to kill a being such as this, so the King moved on. Moved on to a form of magic that no living creature was not susceptible to.

Soul magic was quite difficult to attack with. The energy would rapidly disperse when exposed to environmental mana, and often one had to use one's presence to attack. That is to say, some kind of contact was necessary. Rituals that worked with soul magic were much the same; the caster just used the ritual itself as the origin of the presence.

Soul bolts were possible, but they were the simplest form of soul magic. These bolts mundanely attacked and dealt damage to the soul, and its mana efficiency was far from ideal. The King could do them too but viewed them as beneath him. So he did something else to make a ranged soul attack.

Rather than create a simple soul bolt, the King condensed a golden orb and filled it with soul energy within a barrier. He looked towards the ice elemental and blasted the orb in its direction. The elemental seemed to realize the danger and created a barrier of ice mana just in time as the orb exploded, releasing a golden nova of pure soul energy reminiscent of his ultimate attack.

The response of the elemental was correct, as the energy was mostly blocked by the ice barrier, but what made it through tore into the soul of the C-grade.

Satisfied, the King continued this line of action. A dozen orbs condensed around him as he pointed at the elemental, sending them all out at once. The elemental reacted promptly as giant barriers appeared all around it, but with dozens of novas at once, it failed to adequately block everything.

Damage for cost is acceptable.

The elemental had parts of its body crack and crumble, but sadly for it, the King was far from done. Next, he moved on to more novel applications of his magic. Soul, Gold, Force. These were his tools to reach godhood, and while that was far fewer tools than nearly any other race would have, the King knew.

It was enough.

Waving his hand, he began weaving more magic as he stared at the unfortunate elemental.

He had more experiments to carry out.

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