

## Hunter 521

### Chapter 521 - Celestial Alignment Of Yore

Jake had not really known Chris that well. He was just a guy Jake had saved by coincidence when he killed Abby and her father after they attacked Haven. Later on, he had then given the young man a Blessing from the Viper, and Chris made the monument to allow Jake to teleport out of their universe. To call him a friend wouldn't be entirely correct... but he was Jake's guy. He had worked for Jake. He had only been targeted because of Jake.

So Jake would get revenge for him.

El'Hakan was ready for Jake's attack despite how instant it had been. So were his two followers as both of them exploded with power, activating their boosting skills while moving to intercept. One of them had a sword and a shield, with the other one a healer based on the magic she deployed.

Jake didn't care about these two but headed straight for El'Hakan. He teleported past the warrior and met a barrier from the healer as El'Hakan took out a staff and slammed it into the ground. A wave of red flames hit Jake, but black scales already covered his body as he, with a single hit, shattered the barrier. But before he would land a blow, he was attacked from behind by the warrior.

Fuck you, Jake just thought as he completely ignored the blow and kept up his assault. He stabbed forward and managed to scratch his opponent before the orange fuck turned into flames and flew backward at a rapid speed. In return, Jake got an annoying cut across his back before he spun and kicked the shield of the warrior, blasting him away.

Charging again, he chased after El'Hakan with reckless abandon. Spears of flames flew towards him, but Jake once more ignored it as dodging would only slow him down. The only thing that mattered was killing the person in front of him.

Yet the fuck kept fleeing, and the warrior and healer kept getting in his damn way. For every second, his anger grew. Like a volcano constantly at the edge of an eruption, the heat was just building up. He ignored everything that would not lead directly to damaging Ell'Hakan as nothing else would give him the slightest reprieve.

The damn healer made his life difficult as even when he stabbed the warrior several times, he just got up again, and Ell'Hakan was constantly just turning into fucking flames to run away. What was worse was the constant taunting. Jake did not truly register the words; he just knew they were taunts.

His vision turned red as he felt on the edge of eruption. His inability to simply kill his opponent only angered him even more. At this point, nothing else mattered.

His body pulsed with power as he prepared to push himself further. He was about to increase Arcane Awakening above 60% as suddenly a feeling of danger emerged from within. As if cold water was thrown in his face, Jake suddenly felt a bit of clarity. In the middle of a chase, he closed his eyes.

He is controlling your emotions, you fucking idiot, he told himself as he experienced a moment of clarity.

Jake remembered what his opponent could do. His emotions were still out of control and flaring up. He felt angrier than he likely ever had... but from the anger came an odd sense of calm once he realized why he was mad. Jake opened his eyes again and locked gazes with the Nahoom in front of him.

Seeing he had stopped, Ell'hakan also got a break. "The wild beast has calmed. Once more, you show unique restraint. Though I must confess, I expected more than a charging, mindless--"

“What do you hope to accomplish with this shit?” Jake asked, genuinely unsure. Why the hell would he bother invading their planet in the first place?

“We each walk our Paths. While you might be a hunter, I am not. In this instance, I am only here to work as a liberator. Did your world not like this sort of thing? Foreign countries invading others at the behest of freedom fighters merely to exploit the land? War under false pretenses for personal gain? That is all I am here to do. To free this world from you. At least, that is the story that is told. Truth is subjective, and all that matters is what one can make others believe,” Ell’Hakan said, more talkative than Jake would expect. The problem was that he was just talking, nothing else.

“You didn’t answer shit,” Jake spat out.

“Fine, I shall give you one hint,” Ell’Hakan smiled. “Third World Congress.”

Jake wasn’t sure what the guy meant until his eyes opened wide. Was this fuck trying to get voted World Leader by placing his own City Lords or something? Was that even possible? And did it matter? No... because he would die there today.

His katars disappeared as he equipped his bow and took out a poison bottle he quickly tossed in his quiver, having learned to soak the arrows within a long time ago. The warrior and healer were behind him, ready to engage. Jake marked all three of his targets as he took a deep breath and looked at Ell’Hakan. “You are right about one thing. Our Paths do differ. You are good at talking shit, and I am good at killing shit talkers.”

He then felt what was almost a wave of pure anger hit him, trying to flare up what was there before. But Jake barely registered it as he stepped forward and teleported. Rather than teleport towards Ell’Hakan, he went backward more than three hundred meters as he appeared behind the healer and warrior. An arrow was already nocked as a Splitting Arrow was released towards the woman.

The warrior moved quickly to the side of the healer to defend her, as Jake stepped once more and teleported before shooting again. A barrier emerged around the healer and warrior as Jake stepped and shot three more times from five different angles.

He stopped and shot one more time. The first shots were all explosive arrows, and the barrier was blown up right away as the two were pelted with arcane energy. The very final shot Jake had released was the one stable arrow of the bunch and curved under the shield of the warrior to hit him in the abdomen, making him stumble back.

Ell'Hakan did not stand still as he raised his staff. It was only now that Jake noticed something odd. While it was in the middle of the day, the sunlight was far more intense than usual. It had a red glow, and the air almost shimmered from the sheer heat.

Sun affinity magic, Jake concluded as he dodged back just in time before a beam of burning light descended from above. It burned a hole nearly a dozen meters into the ground right where he had been standing, making Jake frown. The attack was a lot stronger than expected, and from how Ell'Hakan felt, it was clear the man was at a higher level than Jake. Not just one or two levels, but at least over a dozen. His two companions were similarly all higher level than Jake.

But he was not deterred.

In his anger, he had activated Arcane Awakening fully, putting himself on a timer. This was just another fight. One he could win.

The warrior hit with the arrow earlier quickly got healed as Jake continued his attack. He wanted to take down the healer first, but the warrior clearly knew his task was to protect her, so he decided just to kill both of them at once. It was problematic that he was facing the ideal three-man party of a damage-dealing caster, a defensive warrior, and a healer. With none of them being significantly weaker than the others, it made it hard to exploit a weak link.

Magic sprung up all around him as Jake put that larger mana pool to use. His wings appeared and pumped out poison to create a mist covering the entire area. Ell'Hakan himself was too damn hard to lock down and damage, but the healer and warrior? Not so much.

He bombarded them with arcane bolts and exploding orbs, not to damage them but to obscure their vision and give him openings. The first Arcane Powershot landed on the healer not long after, but the woman recovered quickly even after the stable arcane arrow tore off a large part of her chest. The second Powershot hit the warrior, only penetrating deep into his shoulder and making him spin in the air before he stabilized.

Arcane charges were building in both from his marks, and his special little bottle from earlier carried an extra toxic surprise. Ell'Hakan himself failed to hit any attacks no matter what he did. His attempt to manipulate Jake's emotions also failed. Jake was angry. Utterly pissed. But he kept his head cool anyway as he had quite the practice with rampant emotions.

"I admit, you are stronger than our prior conversation, as well as our intel, led me to believe," Ell'Hakan spoke just as Jake blasted away his two companions with an arrow stuck in each. Both of them looked tired and, having had their boosting skills going for all this time, had clearly worn them out. Jake, on the other hand, with his monstrous mana pool and massively improved stamina pool, managed fine. The only one not really pushed yet was Ell'Hakan, who seemed oddly disinterested in the fight. He was just participating in the background to help his companions if it got too dangerous or to keep Jake on his toes and keep the fight at a standstill where the healer could keep up with Jake's damage output.

"When are you going to stop pussyng around and fight me?" Jake asked the fucker.

“When the time is right,” Ell’Hakan smiled. Jake saw straight through the bluff. He felt more confident than before and knew that the orange fuck wasn’t that much stronger than his companions. The magic he used was also big and flashy, consuming a lot of mana. Even if he had a boosting skill, Jake would be fine.

Jake moved again to push his advantage as he wanted to finish off the healer before any of them had the chance to escape. It wasn’t time yet to activate his secret weapon... no, he would save that for the very end and take them by surprise. It wasn’t like he needed to hurry anyway with how big of an advantage he had, so even if he could admit he was not entirely sure as to the efficacy of his poison, all should be fine.

In fact, he would barely even consider it a fight anymore. He was so much superior and-

Jake’s eye opened wide in realization. His emotions had once more been influenced, making him overly confident... but he realized it too late. In an instant, he felt his entire body freeze. He looked upwards and saw an absolutely massive magical circle and two more people floating far above, having been hidden out of his Sphere all this time.

“A profound sense of danger towards attacks, a spherical detection skill with a range between two and five hundred meters in radius. Powerful skills making you a hard opponent to take by surprise... but not impossible,” Ell’Hakan spoke as Jake now saw he was holding some kind of orb in his hand that was linked to the magic circle above as they pulsed in synchronicity.

Space itself seemed locked down around Jake as he struggled to release himself. He felt isolated from the outside world, as if he did not belong there, and yet did not feel like he was in any danger. Jake could not even step down to teleport away... if that would even work.

“In the outskirts of the first Pylon city of Earth, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Celestial Child battled. In a fight almost equal, the Celestial Child, Ell’Hakan, came out on top. In a moment of cowardice, the Malefic One’s Chosen fled in fear, abandoning not just his city but humanity itself,” Ell’Hakan said. “A selfish coward indeed... one not worth ever rallying around.”

Jake wanted to talk but was unable to. It was as if he wasn’t even in the same space as everyone else. Like he had been shifted to a different reality while still being able to see and hear everything.

“I do hope you hurry,” Ell’Hakan said with a smile. “The World Congress shall be your deadline to set history right.”

Space began to shift and move as far above, a projection appeared. It was an entirely blue moon, far smaller than the moon of Earth. It began to move at a visible speed as Jake faintly felt himself be linked to it. Chained to it. Like the tide was controlled by the moon.

“Celestial Alignment of Yore.”

The orb on Ell’Hakan’s orb shattered as he spat out blood, and Jake felt himself be pulled. He wanted to yell but could not move a single muscle. He wanted to move his mana, but it refused to respond.

Just as he was about to be dragged away, Jake’s eyes focused as the space around him faintly distorted. The very second he began to be dragged, he could move once more, and in that very final moment, he raised both his hands towards his opponents as they glowed green.

Touch of the Malefic Viper.

He also detonated his arcane charges from the Marks but was unable to see the result. Within half a second, he lost sight of Ell'Hakan, the Fort, Haven, and everything else. He kept accelerating as if dragged by heavenly chains across the landscape. Everything blurred and distorted as all he saw were moving colors and silhouettes, his mind unable to process everything.

Then suddenly, it stopped.

But the momentum was not gone. Jake fell to the ground like a meteor at speed surpassing one. He saw the ground a millisecond before he impacted it, only able to slightly angle himself as he hit it. Jake took a rolling fall as he bounced off the ground and flew several more kilometers before his second bounce. He felt his shoulder dislocate from the first impact, but after the second one, he could slightly deaccelerate himself with blasts of mana.

After a few more bounces, Jake landed on the ground and saw that he was lying on a large dune of sand. He breathed heavily as he rolled over and tried to stand up as he spat out some sand that had gotten into his mouth. Jake spat it out along with a good deal of blood from his internal injuries as he tried to orient himself. Trying to understand what the hell had just happened.

Jake, trying to get an idea of where he was, felt for Sylphie's location using their Union Oath. His eyes shot open as he stared directly down at the sand below him. She was... nearly straight down. Very far too.

It took him a few moments to comprehend what had just happened, and the moment he realized, he gritted his teeth in frustration, not even caring about his injured body.



He had just been flung to the other fucking side of the planet. Jake cursed and clenched his fists as he tried to calm himself down. It was then that he felt a connection be formed.

"Jake, what happened?" he heard Miranda's voice.

Jake then realized where he had just been fighting. "Tossed to the other side of the planet... get out of there now. Escape Haven and move towards the center of the Grand Mangrove River. Say I sent you."

"Alright," Miranda answered without any hesitation. "We shall... they're here, cutting off the ritual. Will contact once safe."

With that, the connection was severed, and Jake was alone. He flopped down on the sand again as he smashed his fist into it.

Everything was fucked. His only consolation was that Jake had at least given those two annoying fucks a nice parting gift.

Ell'Hakan breathed with difficulty as his head pounded him using the orb. The item was now broken, but it had done its job. He smiled as he saw the Chosen be sent flying away. But at the very last moment, he felt it. An overwhelming determination as the human raised both of his hands as they glowed.

But... he was isolated in the space of yore, so nothing should-

Cao'Estill and Ult'Oriel, his best healer and third-best warrior, suddenly collapsed to the ground as their bodies began bleeding from every orifice. Their blood pooled like thin water, their flesh rotting, and their eyes glazed over.

All he could do was look on as both of their bodies decayed and turned to nothing but mush in front of him within seconds, leaving only rotting, unrecognizable shapes behind.

El'Hakan narrowed his eyes and frowned deeply. Plans... must be adapted.

But they were still on track. This was only the first step, after all.

He turned his gaze towards the direction of Haven as his two companions who had worked on the array joined him.

"What are your orders?" one of them asked.

"Follow me," El'Hakan said. "Let us finally pay this Haven a visit."

Chapter 522 - Across The World

Miranda had been observing the battle from afar until suddenly, a huge magic circle appeared and blocked out her view. When it disappeared, Jake was gone, and she hurriedly contacted him with worry only to discover he had been put out of commission and was now somehow on the other side of the planet.

Having seen the battle, Miranda was confused about how Jake had fought but did not question it. She knew their opponent had a Bloodline that influenced emotions in some way, so she wrote it up to that. Not that it mattered right now as she had more important things to do.

Jake's warning before any attack arrived had allowed her to gather people in time. Hank, his children, Neil and his party, Lillian, and Phillip, had arrived in her underground ritual chamber. When Miranda saw Jake and the alien invader fight, she moved right away to have Neil prepare their escape path in case anything went wrong. She only vaguely remembered Jake mentioning this Grand Mangrove River and how he had passed through and met some friendly C-grades, but he seemed adamant that going there would be the wisest.

"I will need more time," Neil said as he worked at high speed to set up the teleportation circle within the chamber. It was the same kind he had used all the way back in E-grade to reach Haven in the first place.

"Alright," Miranda said as she sat down with crossed legs in the middle of her own ritual circle. The altars all around her flared to life as she began to work her magic, first creating a massive green barrier that protected the main city of Haven. Her eyes began to glow green as she took out several orbs and tossed them onto each of the altars and prepared to show the invaders why attacking a witch's lair was considered a bad idea.

Casper frowned deeply as he looked at the approaching army. Priscilla joined him in the city spire with a worried look on her face. "Most of the Ghastpillars are already destroyed, and we won't be able to get the defensive array up and running in anything less than a week."

"I know," Casper said as he kept staring. He had known this day would come. They both had. It was something that repeated itself time and time again. An event that every new universe seemed to go through, a tribulation the Risen always had to overcome.

They were hated by default. As undead, pre-conceived notions about their existence were always present, and they were viewed as evil simply for existing. So for the natives of a planet to seek their destruction should not come as a surprise, even if Casper, Priscilla, and all the leaders of the Risen on Earth hoped they could finally have a peaceful integration. With Jake and others having so much influence and no negative feelings towards the Risen, they had hope... but alas, the cycle repeated.

“The Holy Church joined them too, huh,” Casper said with disappointment as he saw some of the people approaching. A large group. He counted at least ten thousand D-grades from the Holy Church alone, backed up by even more from the United Cities Alliance. Even if Jacob had warned him during the last World Congress the Holy Church was planning something against the Risen... he did not expect this.

“Did you hear more from the Augur? I thought he would stop an attack, or at the very least warn us,” Priscilla asked.

“Nothing from him at all. I can’t even contact him anymore,” Casper shook his head. By now, they had an okay understanding of the unfolding situation, and for whatever reason, it seemed like the Holy Church had made some kind of pact with the United Cities Alliance to wipe out the Risen. This did not mean they had allied with the United Cities Alliance... just that they were willing to help an enemy to crush an even more hated enemy.

It should not be surprising. It was simply history repeating itself.

Casper closed his eyes as dark energy revolved around him. He looked behind and saw their own fighters begin to gather, preparing for battle. They were outnumbered significantly and were not truly an army like the Holy Church or United Cities Alliance. Especially not after many internal issues had popped up due to plants from the damn Alliance, including the destruction of many defensive buildings.

“We just need to buy time,” Priscilla assured him.

“I know,” Casper nodded. But he couldn’t help but wonder... what the fuck was Jacob doing? What was he planning?

“This time is crucial for you to ensure your C-grade evolution is as successful as possible,” the Bishop said as he guided Jacob through the grand hall. “As an Augur of Hope, you may be able to feel when people walk astray or need guidance, but to also know of what options they then have is entirely different.”

Jacob nodded in recognition as he followed the old man. Despite looking like just an average priest, he was a B-grade Bishop of the Holy Church and the leader of the Chapter that Jacob found himself in. Bertram was also off with some of the local templars to train, making them both busy men.

For a long time, the Holy Church had worked on a solution for people to potentially leave the ninety-third universe, and only a week or so ago, the first gate was successfully made. It was still limited to D-grades and could only send through a few people every day, but it was something. There was also the issue of it being one-way, but that was only a temporary challenge that mages both on Earth and in the wider universe were working on overcoming.

“The students you will meet are all struggling and performing below expectations. Some are veterans of many years, while others are new blood who showed great promise but suddenly began to squander. These were carefully curated, and we believe in your ability to set their fates right and lead them to the best Paths possible for them,” the Bishop said with a smile. “We expect much of you, Augur of Hope.”

Jacob once more nodded. “I shall do my utmost.”

“Good. It is also time you begin to look outwards. To not only focus on the small planet from which you originate. The Holy Church can be found in every universe, and there will always be places that need hope,” the man followed up.

Jacob agreed, but he would want to return to Earth anyway as there was lots of unfinished business there and many people he cared about.

The reason why he had left Earth was to ensure a successful evolution to C-grade. Earth was limited in many ways, and Jacob was implored to go after the gate was established. While he did have some reservations, he also knew he would only be gone for a few months at most, and considering the peaceful state of Earth, it was limited how much the council could mess up in that time, right?

Two flickering wisps observed the movement across the vast mountain range. Monsters of all sorts had assembled but not to fight. To observe. An army had arrived, teleported by what had to be a powerful C-grade. They had appeared extremely close to the Fallen King’s territory and not hesitated to attack. A few Pylons were stolen before the King made his move and tore the pathetic cretins to shreds.

But they kept coming, all led by another powerful leader. The monsters of Earth were no monolith. There was no dominant faction, no agreed-upon alliances or customs for how they would operate and interact. Unlike humans, they had no rules. There was only power. Power would get you followers as other monsters would seek to be under your wing. Be it for Records, treasures, or simply safety. This was why they gathered around powerful leaders.

The Fallen King was one such powerful leader with many beasts, elementals, and other monsters loyal to him.

Loyal until another monster presented itself capable of challenging his position. The Fallen King had never truly viewed this as a threat. C-grades would not come to challenge him as while there were no set rules, there was simply nothing in it for them to hunt down a D-grade. Even if that D-grade was strong enough to challenge a C-grade. There was also the fear of failing to kill him and the Fallen King returning for revenge. With the enhanced intelligence all C-grades experienced, it was no surprise none had been foolish enough to challenge him yet.

Until that day.

The army that had dared invade his domain was led by a creature, unlike anything the Fallen King had met before. Shifting ash, a living storm of half-burning embers, and a form that remained ever-changing. The Fallen King recognized this foe as the creature assembled itself into a form floating in between two mountains.

A Unique Lifeform. Like he.

[Ashen Phantom Devourer – lvl 199]

At the same level as him too. Both standing at the precipice, refining themselves and reaching for perfection. Proving their Paths.

“A Devourer by choice. Your Path is apparent to all. Laughable, as it is a foolish one,” the Fallen King spoke, his voice spreading throughout the mountain range for tens of thousands of monsters to hear.

“A King who has already Fallen once dares speak of foolishness. Be honored, and become sustenance for my Path,” the Ashen Phantom Devourer spoke as the sky trembled as it released its power.

“Fallen... and having learned from his fall,” the King answered back as his own power manifested, and the trembling sky was pushed back, space itself cracking from the clashing power of two Unique Lifeforms at the peak of D-grade.

They had no true reason to fight. They had never met, knew nothing of each other. And yet there was no doubt or hesitation in either of them. It was not a question of why or intent – neither needed any reason or justification. All there was left was the fight to discover who of them was supreme.

Jake felt like shit and just wanted to charge into the horizon to get back, but before doing anything else, he had to heal. Arcane Awakening had ravaged his body quite a bit, and the entire flung-across-the-planet thing had certainly not helped. He felt lucky he had landed in sand and not rock or maybe smashed into a mountain, but a part of him also doubted it was luck. The words Ell’Hakan had spoken made him believe the plan was never to kill him.

He quickly chugged a healing potion and entered meditation as Jake considered what kind of bullshit skill had been used on him. It did not seem like something a D-grade should be capable of at all. Was it due to that orb? The ritual circle? Or was it just a skill of an insanely high rarity? It had Yore in the name, so what if that was the skill granted by Yip of Yore from his True Blessing? Jake had gotten a divine rarity skill, and even if Ell’Hakan did not get that, it had to be at least mythical or something, right? Maybe above mythical but below divine, assuming there were rarities in between.

There were so many doubts in his mind, but one thing was clear as day: Jake had been countered. From the very moment he appeared, he had been playing along with whatever Ell’Hakan had planned. He hated the thought, but chances are killing Chris was done only with the intent to piss him off. If he had not done that, Jake would have just appeared confused about why the orange guy was there. But with the death of Chris, Jake had blown his fuse immediately and attacked like an absolute idiot. He had not acted according to anything he had practiced at all but just been tunnel-visioning from start to end. It was an utter failure on his part.



What made it even worse was that Jake had no fucking idea what it was all about. If the plan had always been to fight him, only to toss him away, why fight in the first place? To buy time? Did they even need to buy time with fighting? If Ell'Hakan had just talked, Jake would have been delayed plenty. And what did he hope to accomplish by sending Jake away? To take over Haven? Hurt those who lived there? If that was what he wanted, he could have just broken the monument before Jake could return to Earth. He clearly had time.

No, he had wanted Jake to return, and he had wanted to send him away to where he was now. But for the life of him, Jake could not figure out why the fuck he would want that. Just to try and spread rumors and ruin Jake's reputation? Why the fuck would he think Jake would care about that?

Jake was annoyed beyond belief as he tried to focus on something more positive. Like the fact he at least got in a nice blow at the end. He had killed two of them, and he knew from their level of power they were not weak, and to cultivate people of that power this early on in the integration meant a significant investment. No matter what, it had to have been a loss that stung.

Checking his notifications, he saw he also gained a level.

\*You have slain [Nahoom - lvl 191 / Sworn Celestial Mender - lvl 183 / Servant of the Celestial Child – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.

\*You have slain [Nahoom - lvl 187 / Royal Shield Guard - lvl 175 / Servant of the Celestial Child – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 173 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 178 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

He was a bit confused at seeing them both have the same profession, and both have it maxed out. Jake had heard from Miranda that she had gotten skills related to Jake, so was this the same thing? It had to be, right? Or was Celestial Child just some title Ell'Hakan stole from someone else? More questions he had no answers to.

As for how he had killed the two of them.... well, let's just say he had gotten some good stuff out of his long alchemy sessions and his extreme spending.

Jake had made a little extra something shortly before returning from the Order. He only had a few bottles so far and had just used one, but the effect had been more than satisfactory.

[Sleeping Night Toxin (Rare)] – Sometimes, the most potent poison is that which is never felt or seen before it is too late. Mixing eth, hemo- and necrotic toxins, a potent yet harmless poison has been made. Will be in a hidden sleeping state by default, making it near-undetectable. If injected into a foe, it will simply linger within the Soulshape, slowly dispersing harmlessly. However, if awakened, the toxins will all spring to life, seeking to kill their target with necrotic and hemotoxin properties. Will cause direct damage to both the Soulshape and physical body of those infected once awakened. Has an increased effect if the target is unaware of the infection upon activation.

It was Jake's magnum opus so far when it came to poisons. It had combined everything he had learned and was far more challenging to make than anything else he had. Jake's own success chance when concocting it was in the single digits percentage-wise, and each concoction only gave him one or two bottles. Not to mention the cost. The toxin was far more complex than anything he had made prior too. Shit, he had even somehow mixed in a bit of that stealth attack concept.

As with other creations, the poison's weaknesses and limitations translated to more overall power once these aspects were circumvented. Rather than slowly infect someone with poison and damage them little by little, this poison was instant. It would spread throughout harmlessly until Jake activated it using his newly upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper. He had considered making a poison like this for a long time but had only truly begun after upgrading the skill.

He continued his meditation for a while longer and felt in pretty good shape again. He had only really expended stamina and mana during the fight, and his health was fixed quickly with the earlier potion. Opening his eyes, Jake stood up and stretched a bit. Rustling his cloak, he also got out all of the damn sand as he finally got a good look around and just saw desert all around for what had to be thousands of kilometers in each direction.

Jake knew there was nothing else to do but get moving.

Yet as he stood there and considered what direction to move in, he felt faint tremors below. He wondered if it was coming for him but felt the movements go elsewhere. Looking out into the desert, he saw some stones spread around but nothing else.

Suddenly the ground rumbled as three yellow pillars that seemed to meld into the background shot up from the ground as if coming up for air. Large wriggling forms more than a hundred meters long, all three of which Jake quickly identified.

[Veilskin Sand Worm – lvl 197]

[Veilskin Sand Worm – lvl 196]

[Veilskin Sand Worm – lvl 192]

Jake stared at them a bit in awe as he saw something else out of the corner of his eye. Hundreds of kilometers away, it looked as if a tower was suddenly erected as a massive form emerged. Its length had to be measured in kilometers.

[Behemoth Sand Worm – lvl ???]

Similar scenes played out around him as Jake realized he had found himself smack in the middle of Sand Worm territory... which made him realize that sometimes you have to find the good in the bad. Jake had a lot of pent-up frustration and a long journey ahead of him.

The worms wouldn't help with the distance, but they sure as hell would help with the frustration as he took out his bow. He knew he needed to figure out how to not get fucked over again by Ell'Hakan... but no matter what, more power would help whatever anti-fuckery method he found.

Chapter 523 - Just Sand-Witch Things

Due to the suddenness of the attack, many of those behind it still remained within Haven. They believed they could simply lie low and hide, acting like normal citizens until their side came out on top. It had worked for a time... but only because Miranda had been distracted.

Every action carried intent, and this intent followed you like a dark fog. Not to normal people... but to Miranda, there were traces left behind at the broken teleportation circle for her to track. Creatures that existed only in the minds and dreams had seen what they had done. It did not take her long to locate those who had been behind the destruction of the teleporters.

They were just mostly normal people, some not even D-grade. Miranda could admit that the security around their teleporters had been shit. No one expected an attack, and she still found any potential explanation for the attack nonsensical. Haven had done all it could to stay neutral, so why the hell target them?

Annoyed but pressed for time, Miranda did not have time to interrogate them. Considering their goal of escape, she would not have time to either as she made the call.

The man hid his face as he walked through the busy panicked streets. Everyone were confused as they had only heard that the Viper's Chosen had returned to Earth and engaged the alien invader. This confusion turned to something akin to panic when the fight stopped, and a barrier encompassed the entire city.

None of it was his concern. The citizens were safe; they were never the targets. He saw them as victims, the lot of them.

People sought their homes, and so did the man. He got inside and quickly closed the door, and activated what defensive measures each house was equipped with. After taking off his cloak, he headed toward his living room.

Plopping down on the couch, he let out a sigh of relief. He and the others had not been discovered yet, and considering the lack of response, he doubted they would. All he had to do was wait now.

Feeling relatively safe, he got up again and went to grab a bottle from his fridge. Well, it was just a box with a magic circle to cool it down, but it worked as a fridge.

He walked over and opened it just as he heard a knock on his door. The door to his bedroom. His eyes opened wide as he whipped his head towards the door, with his hand still reaching for the bottle stashed in the back of the fridge. Yet rather than a bottle, he felt his hand meet something soft.

The man barely had time to turn his head before two hands grasped his wrist and dragged him into the fridge, slamming the door behind him. A faint sound was emitted from within before the door opened again – the only thing remaining a severed hand clutching a bottle.

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Miranda quickly eliminated all of them after summoning the Drowned Swamp Maidens, using one of her more efficient rituals to kill those significantly weaker than herself and within her domain. How the skill worked exactly wasn't something Miranda entirely knew. What she did know was that it called upon the spirits of the Drowned Swamp Maidens, which were more conceptual apparitions than anything truly real. They were living ideas.

Getting rid of the terrorists – because that is what they were – had only taken her around a minute. In that time, Ell'hakan and his two followers had not rushed over but simply walked up to the edge of the barrier at a leisurely pace.

She observed as the man stopped in front of the barrier. He raised his hand and touched it for a faint moment and waited five or so seconds before speaking. "Ms. Wells, I believe you should be able to hear me, am I correct?"

Miranda briefly opened her eyes and saw Neil was still hard at work, having even put his party members to work placing down materials in the circle. Closing them again, she decided to buy time. At that moment, when she felt his hand touch the barrier, she felt a pulse go into it, making her tremble. She

did not know what it was and decided that if the guy wanted to talk... she would talk. Well, she wouldn't talk.

Focusing, she took out a small doll and infused some magic into it. Placing it in the middle of the circle, she said an incantation and immersed her mind.

In the outside world, a figure faded into existence. A human-sized doll looking quite a bit like Miranda appeared, looking more than a little scary with its oversized buttons for eyes and amateur craftsmanship. Miranda had to sew it herself, and damn was she bad at sewing.

But the doll worked as its mouth moved. "Is it not a basic skill expected of a City Lord to have some level of perception within the domain they rule?"

"It is. I must say, this is my first time ever meeting a witch, and I am already intrigued," Ell'Hakan spoke, looking at the doll. "I would like to apologize for before. I believed it necessary to show that I have ways to break barriers such as this to make you come out for a talk. Ah, on that, I would advise you to not rely too much on the Pylon for city defenses. As a noble with a significantly higher rank and a profession that allows it, I possess skills to combat it quite effectively. Instead, I would work on making your own skills the primary basis of the barrier, with the Pylon only acting as an auxiliary energy source."

Miranda looked confused at the man speaking. Enough to doubt if Ell'Hakan could influence her through the puppet. But she quickly ruled that out simply by how she assumed it worked. If his ability was to influence emotions, he had to influence the soul, and the puppet she had sent did not contain anything to influence. Which begged the question:

"Why are you telling me that?"

“Friendly advice from one ruler to another,” Ell’Hakan answered. “And a good icebreaker that shows my intent. I want to make an educated guess and say you are currently working on a method of escape or some kind of counterattack. Probably escape, considering I just defeated the Chosen of the Viper.”

“You did not defeat him; you just delayed him and pissed him off,” Miranda countered in a curt tone.

“I did what I intended. Today was not the time for an actual fight,” the man nodded in recognition. “I will just lay the cards out on the table. I have no interest in causing you any harm, Ms. Wells, but I have made a deal with the United Cities Alliance, as they call themselves. They very much would like to see you dead.”

“Are you really going with the “it’s not personal” line?” Miranda scoffed.

“Not really. I am going with the line of saying that you should escape. I will not stop you. But I will warn you that the United Cities Alliance will try to take you down. From what I heard, the Chosen’s influence on this planet would be significantly weakened and his current political position ruined if you were to die,” Ell’Hakan explained.

“Doesn’t sound like a reason to suddenly spare me and not break in here and now,” Miranda answered. She briefly disconnected from her doll, and Neil signaled her that he was soon ready. Entering it again, she saw Ell’Hakan shake his head and chuckle.

“We both know that entering wouldn’t lead to a pleasant experience. For either of us. What you are capable of is not pertinent information, and I would prefer not to take such an unnecessary risk. The Verdant Witches are notorious for their mysticism, and you are none the different. With me having no interest in attacking you, simply waiting for you to leave seems like the best cause of action. Ah, but do be warned that if you choose to stay, I will have to act at one point or another,” Ell’Hakan warned.



"You want me to just leave Haven in your hands?" Miranda shot back. That was exactly what she was going to do, but she had to at least act like the man didn't have the upper hand. Also... she wanted to know what he was planning.

"I will lay no claim on anything here today. Someone from the United Cities Alliance will come and take charge for now. No one has any interest in killing the citizens, so rest easy," Ell'Hakan assured her.

"Grand words coming from someone who is all about bullshit lies and making up stories."

"But I do speak the truth, as no story matters if there are none to remember and tell it," Ell'Hakan simply said.

"A story that is a lie. What are you even hoping to accomplish? Ruin our reputations? Even if you succeed in doing that, how will it matter? Can you truly call that an actual victory?" Miranda asked. "To me, it all seems like the pathetic actions of someone too weak to battle Lord Thayne head-on."

Miranda hoped to get a bit of a rise out of the guy. Maybe make him temporarily lose his cool and overshare. She had confidence that even if he wanted to attack now, she could hold him off long enough for Neil to be done.

"Fighting... holds little meaning," Ell'Hakan spoke. "A fight is always just a single line in the history books. A declaration of the outcome after the fact. Tell me, how many were truly aware of our brief battle here today? A few dozen? Add on a few bored gods gazing upon events they truly don't care about, and it is little more than a handful. My words of the battle will echo more true than anyone else. All they know is that a fight took place, and it ended up with me left standing and the Malefic's Chosen gone. I know

what you are hoping to accomplish, but let me assure you; a story is better told if not spoiled beforehand. Killing the Chosen would have been a waste. I am not telling a small tale but a true epic.”

“One where you try to define what is the truth,” Miranda said.

“Precisely,” Ell’Hakan smiled. “I have enjoyed our brief conversation, even if it was rather one-sided. I would advise you to leave now or show your hand as I can delay no longer before my partners get dissatisfied with my dallying.”

He snapped his fingers as Miranda’s doll caught fire and burned down in an instant, throwing Miranda back to her real body. In the middle of the ritual circle, her small doll had now turned to ashes. She only had time to orient herself before she felt a pulse go through the barrier. The pulse seemed to attack not the barrier’s energy but the very framework.

“How long?” Miranda asked.

“Done, was just waiting for you,” Neil said.

Miranda nodded as she hurried over to the teleportation circle. Just before stepping on it, she briefly spoke a final spell before getting teleported away along with most other notable characters in Haven – besides Sultan and Arnold.

No one liked sand. As spoken by a not-that-wise man long ago: It’s coarse, rough, irritating, and gets everywhere. And that was normal sand. Magical sand was even worse. Not because it was finer and somehow more everywhere, but because it sure as hell was coarser and rougher by a significant magnitude.

And then there were sandstorms. Sandstorms on Earth before the system could be devastating, but a post-system sandstorm was on an entirely different level.

Jake was already in an even worse mood than usual when it arrived. He had tried to hurry through the desert while hunting down sand worms, but the fuckers were borderline impossible to kill. Even the peak D-grade ones Jake could not easily get rid of. Their bodies were massive, and they clearly had an equally massive health pool, but the worst part was their behavior. He had yet to have a single one even try to fight back. He had even tried to attack a C-grade, done all the preparations, been as ready as he could, only for him to land a single Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter before the worm dove straight down and swam away for him to never see it again.

That is when he truly realized... these worms did not at all care about fighting. They just ate stuff. Jake had wondered how that would even work, as the surface was bound to run out of natural treasures and high-energy items at some point.

Which is where the sandstorms came in.

It was like the very horizon had moved towards him. A towering wall of sand reaching into the sky for several kilometers had barreled towards Jake as he tried to fly through the desert. He had reacted quickly and tried to mimic the worms by boring into the ground and hiding until things blew over. This should work, right?

Wrong.

Because this sandstorm was a true marvel of the elements. It was a zone of earth and wind mana that mixed and created what could almost be called a moving domain. A true wonderland for creatures that relied on these energies. Or one to spawn such creatures.

Elementals simply came into being within the massive sandstorm, and while the sand worms did not want to fight, these elementals sure did. Like as if a giant vacuum cleaner had been turned on, several elementals sucked up all the sand around Jake and pulled him out of the desert.

He felt sand hit his body and himself take damage as it impacted him with near super-sonic speeds. Sand even found the eyeholes of his mask and hit one eye, forcing him to close it. Jake was well and truly pissed as he used his one good eye to identify one of the elementals attacking him.

[Sand Elemental – lvl 184]

One would maybe think that this kind of environment was bad for Jake. And they would be right. But that did not really matter much when all he faced were D-grade elementals.

Arcane Awakening in the stable mode activated as a faint arcane barrier covered his entire body. This passive shield was usually not a big deal, but when it blocked thousands of small “attacks” every second? It allowed him to effectively ignore the environmental effects and move to kill his foes as he did the one thing that always worked: blow them the hell up with destructive arcane arrows.

Meanwhile, Jake made his way out of the sandstorm. As he traveled through it, he saw entire sand worms had been dragged out of the ground and into the storm, as well as hundreds of other creatures. The sand worms seemed to make it out, though, as they worked together and used sand magic of their own to help others escape. Elementals consumed the creatures that could not get away, and it was as if the sandstorm itself absorbed some of the energy whenever something died.

However, while the sandstorm took, it also gave, as it left behind treasures. Treasure generated from the sandstorm itself that simply dropped onto the sand and was left behind. If not for being stuck in the middle of the damn storm, Jake would have marveled at the ways the ecosystem had evolved.

After more than an hour of struggle, Jake finally made it out of the sandstorm and saw the massive natural phenomenon just continue sweeping across the desert. His momentary sense of relief from being out was promptly broken as he realized he had been flying back in the direction he had just come from to get out of the damn storm.

"Fuck me," Jake muttered as he wondered what to do. As he was flying up in the air, he saw dozens of sandworms begin to emerge below to consume the natural treasures dropped from the sandstorm. As Jake stared at them, he got an idea. An idea that just might work.

He just needed one of them to eat him first...

#### Chapter 524 - Into The Ground

Getting a massive sandworm to eat you was actually way easier than Jake had expected. Not that Jake should have expected much from the get-go, it was a stupid expectation. All he had done was just land on the sand, get semi-close to a natural treasure while using Arcane Stealth, and boom, a worm popped up and swallowed him. It was a level 198 worms, so damn close to evolution too.

The worm nearly instantly noticed it had caught something it didn't want and tried to spit him out. However, Jake held on inside its massive maw as he spoke. "Hey! Worm! Make a deal!"

It did not react but kept trashing and trying to spit Jake out. That is when he realized that the sand worms had no ears and probably not even a sense of hearing, making him switch to telepathy.

"Worm. Make deal. You help me, I help you. If not, death."

As he said the words, Jake took out a handful of earth affinity herbs and tossed them down the gullet of the worm. It was a gamble... that paid off immediately as the worm stopped moving. By now, Jake was hanging onto the flesh walls of the giant worm's mouth as he spoke again.

"If you help me get that way," Jake sent telepathically as he poked the side of the giant worm's mouth with a weak arcane bolt. "I will feed you. Okay?"

It should not come as a surprise that the giant worm could not speak. Jake was really gambling on this idea as he assumed that these sand worms were dumb as bricks and-

"I apologize; I think there is some kind of misunderstanding. I did not mean to try and eat you... actually, what are you?" Jake heard a deep rumbling voice in his head.

Wait, what? Jake questioned himself.

"You understand me?" Jake asked, confused.

"I think? I am more questioning how you can speak. You aren't a worm. Or are you? You don't look like one, but I have seen weird worms before..." the creature spoke.

"I am not a worm, no," Jake made clear. "I am human and ended up here on accident. All I am looking for is a way out of the desert."

"Human? What are those? And why leave? You can't move properly outside. A few tried. Oh, unless you get stronger and evolve, I saw one able to do it. Are you evolved?" the overly curious worm asked.

Jake had to admit, when he began his plan, he had not expected to have a conversation with a worm. He had more hoped to communicate his intent and perhaps find a way to nudge the worm in the right direction while bribing it with stuff.

"I am not evolved, no, but I can move properly outside. I cannot move properly here, though, which is why I need your help," Jake said. "If you can help me get out of the desert, I can give you good stuff in return."

The worm fell silent for a few moments, still just sitting there while poking out of the sand like a tower with its mouth wide open, making it so Jake could fly out at any moment. "What kind of stuff?" it finally asked.

Jake smiled a bit to himself as he took out one of the orbs he had looted from one of the many Earth Elementals he had killed while traveling with Carmen. "Things like this," Jake said as he threw the orb down the long tunnel that was the worm's mouth.

Seconds passed before the worm answered. "Okay. I will help you, human. Also, don't I have to? If not, I will die."

He had kind of forgotten he had threatened death before. Jake had only really done it, as that kind of intent was something animals tended to understand.

"I promise I won't hurt you at all. Instead, let's make this something to benefit us both."

"Sounds better than death, that is for sure," the worm said, Jake detecting a hint of sarcasm in the voice. Had he found himself a sassy giant sand worm?

The next few minutes passed as Jake talked with the worm and got a better idea of how their species worked. The worms were actually damn good at magic and moved primarily through some kind of earth telekinesis to push them forward using the sand, allowing them to travel at frankly insane speeds for their size.

To hunt for treasures better, the worms all stayed in contact through some kind of telepathy network. It worked by them linking up with one another while in the area, and often a single C-grade always stayed close to the larger groups of worms to help them in case anything went wrong. There were creatures besides the Sand Elementals that hunted the worms, but most never chased down into the sand, so as long as the worms could warn others in time, they stayed safe. All in all, Jake learned to not disrespect the intelligence of giant sand worms.

In return, Jake told the worm of things outside the desert as he also guided where they should go.

Using threads of stable arcane mana, he anchored himself to the side of the worm's mouth and got into a comfortable position. Contrary to what one would expect, the inside of the worm was not moist at all but dry as the desert outside. The walls of the mouth were also rough and tough like rock, likely from repeatedly swallowing sand. Something the worm would avoid doing with its passenger along.



That is how Jake managed to catch a ride inside a giant sand worm as he traveled what had to be a few kilometers under the sand. They shot forward with the speed of a bullet through the desert, and Jake faintly felt a few worms around them at times, but being inside of one made them all ignore him. The worm did say that a few detected him, but the worm just explained it away somehow. Jake chose to trust his driver in this, as honestly? It seemed like a stand-up worm. Would definitely rate it five stars.

He felt good enough to enter meditation, where he finally found time to rummage on one of his most pertinent issues: what if Ell'Hakan could do that weird transportation skill again?

It didn't seem likely, but Jake saw no reason to gamble on that one. Even if he didn't have more orbs or a ritual circle, it was a huge risk anyway, simply because Jake had no way to currently combat whatever concept the skill relied on.

While there were aspects of it, it wasn't space magic. Jake had a strong feeling that even if he managed to break through and use One Step, he would not have been freed. Maybe he would have moved a bit, but the skill would still have taken effect and flung him away, making the few hundred meters he managed to teleport insignificant.

One Step was a skill that was purely space magic. It relied one hundred percent on the concept of space to travel, so if space magic was just a part of it, it wouldn't allow him to get out. He needed something far different.

Considering his first escape skill was Shadow Vault, Jake popped into his Soulspace and-

"No," sim-Jake said the moment he appeared.

Jake exited his Soulspace again and considered his second option. One he had seen be used to escape a very perilous situation before when used by its maker.

He was naturally thinking of Wings of the Malefic Viper.

The attack on the Risen had started as expected. The weaker individuals took the frontlines from the side of the Holy Church and United Cities Alliance while the Risen tried to preserve their numbers and strength. They tried to only send out the stronger parties from their side as this was not a battle they could win. Only delay. Priscilla stayed back to organize everything while Casper had chosen to take to the battlefield.

It's a bit weird when I think about it, Casper thought to himself as he released his curses upon the opposing army.

He was a Risen and what many would call a bringer of death and misery with his specialization in curses. Yet, Casper realized that he hadn't actually killed any humans since the Tutorial. Not even during the Treasure Hunt had a taken a single life due to how the Risen had approached the event.

Until today, that is.

War was a common occurrence in the multiverse. He knew the Blightfather and the undead faction as a whole condoned these kinds of wars and viewed them as a good thing. It helped weed out the population and, in turn, gave rise to not only more powerful, but more talented individuals. War was far more than a single fight. It was a long struggle and something that forced you to not only train your skills but your mind. Those who came out of a war on top either had their mentality steeled or broken.

Casper himself was an example of the latter. He had already been broken once during the Tutorial. He knew he was not made for war. He hated it. He despised the senseless killing of people fighting for things that were either lies or that they barely believed in. Most of the invaders from the Holy Church or United Cities Alliance were only there because of what their factions had lied about or due to sheer ignorance. They had no personal reason. Casper hated every moment he spent on the battlefield... which only made him stronger.

It didn't help that he was really fucking good at it.

Curses were fueled by emotions, and the battlefield was a very emotional place. Casper simply had to fuel the fire as he took advantage of the area. One had to remember that the Risen were the defenders, and even if many of their defensive measures had been sabotaged, far from all had been struck. The most potent defenses only a handful were aware of. One of these defensive items was called the Thousand Splinters Pillar. To the naked eye, it looked like a giant rotten tree trunk, but to Casper, it was a battery of infinite weapons.

Casper flew above the battlefield with the large pillar floating behind him as he sent splinters raining down towards the battlefield. Every time a splinter hit someone, they were struck by a mental attack. Those unable to resist lashed out and began attacking those around them mercilessly as their perception of who was an ally or friend changed. To make it worse then, the curse energy in each splinter would be amplified every time the person attacked someone.

Within the first half of an hour of the battle, Casper killed hundreds. Within the first day, over a thousand. It slowed down with time as they adapted, but Casper was just stronger. Some were not even D-grade, and Casper quickly realized something was off but kept fighting. At the beginning of the second day, after a long rest where others had to take to the battle, he pushed forward as he killed more and more, soon leaving behind the other Risen. If he was ahead of the others, he could limit casualties on their side.

Keeping up and pressing his advantage, Casper soon found himself close to enemy lines. He stopped, and as this moment, his Spirit Mark resonated, and he heard Priscilla speak.

"Retreat for now. They are just throwing bodies at us to tire us out both mentally and in resources."

Casper Instantly agreed as he began to make his way back. He stared at the battlefield below and saw corpses everywhere. Most were from the Holy Church, but Priscilla was right... these were just meat shields. Proof once more of the ruthlessness of the Holy Church when it came to war. They were willing to make any sacrifice as long as they won. Their own elites also had cowardly stayed back from the moment Casper rejoined the battle.

One of the defensive measures they still had on the side of the Risen was a single Orb of Second Awakening – a one-time use item that would send a specially attuned death mana pulse out to reanimate those who had died as undead. Not risen, just mindless monsters. But the Church and United Cities clearly knew this as flames constantly swept across the battlefield, burning the bodies of the fallen, followed by pulses from the priests of the Holy Church to "purify" the souls. It was cruel but effec-

"Watch out!" Casper suddenly heard mid-retreat.

He did not react in time, but a shield still appeared and blocked a beam of light that had been headed straight for him as one of his pre-prepared spells activated. Casper's eyes opened wide as a second attack arrived, this time from directly below. He retreated away, towards the battlefield once more, as a sword of light cut the area he had just stood. The air shimmered as a figure was revealed from invisibility. As he appeared, so did his comrades.

"Thousands dead to isolate me in an ambush..." Casper muttered.

Five people had appeared, and he recognized three of them as the party members of Bertram. It was the healer Noor, the swordsman Lucian and mage Joshua. Notable absent were the two strongest people in the party, Maria and Bertram.

The two replacements were also an archer and a warrior.

"Thousands of fates realized as they enter the Holyland with honor," the priestess, Noor, said.

God damn fanatics, Casper cursed as he saw no need for further words. With the pillar still floating behind him, Casper counterattacked as he prioritized getting back to safety. Lucian cut him off and tried to strike Casper but was intercepted by a wooden barrier that exploded in his face.

Joshua released a beam of light that forced Casper to dodge as he sent cursed stakes in retaliation. The archer and warrior also joined the fray and tried to pressure the Risen, but the difference was clear. Which only made Casper frown more as they should know they didn't stand a chance. Which meant it was as he and Priscilla expected...

"Do you need my help?" Lyra asked him from within his pendant, but Casper refused.

"Save your energy in case they have a trick up their sleeve. They have something planned, and I may need you to get us out of here," Casper answered. He had not overextended without a backup plan.

Lyra acknowledged as she was ready to unleash her power if anything went awry. Casper handled the fight fine on his own, but killing any one of them was an issue. He lacked in the damage output

department as he was the type of fighter to slowly build up curses in his foes or lead them into traps. With no time to set up traps, Casper just had to fight with his wooden stakes and general curse magic as he ever-so-slowly tried to get away.

The group had only revealed themselves the moment Casper had begun retreating, so it was clear something was up. He tried probing out responses as he used a boosting skill and pressed Lucian hard. Giant stakes appeared all around Casper as he made them connect to the pillar floating behind him, sending out pulses of pure curse energy.

Casper was about to explode the entire thing as he felt something was off.

"You fucking bastards," Casper muttered as he looked down. Thousands of motes of light had appeared, floating in the air as Noor spoke an incantation.

"Holy martyrs, heed my call!" the insane priestess yelled as the many motes of light began moving.

Casper had underestimated the depravity of the Holy Church. These people were not just meat shields; they were straight-up sacrifices. He knew this kind of magic; it was something the Holy Church had deployed before. Each of the killed members from the Holy Church had carried on them a mark that effectively turned them into dead people walking to bring out more power, and when they then died, all their remaining energy would be focused into the mark. The holy "purification" earlier was not to cleanse their souls or whatever either, but simply a way to prime the motes.

The motes of light flew up and entered a mark on the swordsman Lucian. Casper was perplexed for a moment until he realized what they were doing- These people are batshit insane.

Lucian began glowing with intense light as Casper tried to back away, but the four others moved to stop him. Each of them had activated all their boosting skills to try and keep him still as Lucian's aura grew with every moment.

Just as he was about to unleash it all, Casper snickered a bit.

"Lyra. Now."

Casper's body suddenly glowed green as a ghostly form appeared above him. Lyra opened her mouth and let out a fitting unholy scream that sent out a wave of soul energy. At the same same, the pillar exploded, sending splinters in every direction. Everyone were stunned and pelted with splinters as Casper's entire body turned green and transparent before he flew straight down towards the ground.

Lucian broke through the stun effect and chased him, surpassing Casper's speed and catching up to him rapidly. The Risen pressed himself even more, and he felt his body burn from the man's sheer presence as he looked like a miniature sun. Lucian's blade closed in just as Casper reached the ground... and continued.

The blade impacted the soil as a huge explosion shook the battlefield, sending shockwaves out. A bright light flashed before it subsided, leaving only a deep hole in the ground as well as a struggling Lucian. He tried to strike again, but his arm broke mid-swing as his body started to turn to motes of light. A few seconds later, not a single trace of him remained as his body had been consumed by the holy power.

Back behind the walls, a ghostly green figure emerged right next to Priscilla. It was naturally Casper who quickly turned corporal again before slumping to the ground. "Those absolute maniacs actually fucking did it."

"We expected it," Priscilla sighed, still clearly troubled by the sheer level of fanaticism displayed by the church.

Casper nodded as he looked over at a certain cave. "Is it time we make our grand exit?"

"Most have already been evacuated," Priscilla answered.

"Go now," Casper said. "I will help the rest retreat from the battlefield as you lead the last ones in there."

"We're really doing this," Priscilla said, uncertainty clear on her face.

"We tried and failed," Casper said. "So let's just stick to the original plan. We should have just accepted long ago that Earth would never be a home for us anyway."

#### Chapter 525 - Making (Unpleasant) Business Deals

Wings of the Malefic Viper was honestly a bit of a weird skill in Jake's repertoire when Jake thought about it. Mainly in that he didn't really need one of its primary functions anymore: the ability to fly. Jake could fly just using mana manipulation already.

This meant the skill now only served as a way to pump out poison mist. It did add a bit of maneuverability while flying, but it was not that major. Jake knew that a lot of the skills Records went into simply summoning the wings in their phantasmal form and adding them to the Soulshape, but that wasn't exactly something Jake "needed" either.



Jake still used the wings a lot due to their relatively low upkeep, which meant the only time he really spent resources on them was with the initial summoning and when he pumped out poison. The poison pumped out also wasn't exactly impressive. It mostly just served as a way to keep his current poison active and the occasional area of effect attack.

Upgrading the poison mist aspect of the skill did not appeal to him either. Besides, if he upgraded his Blood of the Malefic Viper, he would inadvertently also upgrade the mist. There was also the approach of trying to make them more durable or perhaps increase the maneuverability and overall flight speed. There was even the approach of going the same direction as Draskil, where his wings allowed him short-range teleports and speed-ups in battle. His version was clearly one specialized for movement in combat and taking advantage of his existing physical stats. But that wasn't the direction Jake wanted to take it.

During his vision, where he saw Villy get smacked by Valdemar, he had seen Wings of the Malefic Viper be used as an escape skill to great effect. He had felt how the wings had somehow been activated, and a "tunnel" of sorts had been formed that allowed him to escape. Jake wanted something like that.

He wanted an escape skill, not necessarily to run from a fight he could not win like Villy had, but to escape situations that rendered him stuck or sealed in some way. Like the skill, Ell'Hakan had used that had seemed to isolate Jake from the rest of the world for its duration.

One Step was already better at long-distance movement anyway. It was a legendary skill specialized in travel, while Wings had so many other aspects. There were some issues with upgrading it, though.

Having already been shown the skill twice, Jake was not sure if he could see it again. It did say that he could only view a vision of a skill once, but did the one he had count? It felt more like that one had been about Fangs of the Malefic Viper rather than Wings.

Nevertheless, Jake tried to use the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill as he focused on Wings of the Malefic Viper. Not necessarily to use it, but to see if he even could, and to his disappointment, the skill did not activate right way. This left him even more unsure as he still didn't know if it was because he didn't fulfill some requirement to see the vision or because he had used his one chance on the skill.

He also tried to reflect on the feeling back during the vision he had before, but it was all too blurry for him to remember. His focus back then had been on Fangs of the Malefic Viper and Fang of Man and not Wings, so even when he had felt the escape technique, his mind had partly been elsewhere.

"You busy?" the worm suddenly asked Jake as he meditated on the issue.

"Only a little," Jake answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You said you wanted to hurry, right? The problem is that up ahead is the territory of scorpions, and they like to hide in the sand and attack if we try to go through, so we tend to avoid them. Avoiding them and going around will be slower, though... but if the human is strong, then maybe..." the worm said very leadingly.

"Let me guess, they have a C-grade leader of some kind?" Jake asked.

"Yep, and it is very dangerous. One of the big worms tried to scare them off once but was hit, and it took weeks to recover from the nasty venom. We aren't that good at fighting, if you haven't noticed, and trying to swallow them wouldn't end well as they have tough bodies and are very poisonous even when eaten. A few worms have eaten some of them, and it never ended well," the worm explained.

"So I guess this all for the well-being of worm society?" Jake asked a bit teasingly.

"Their leader may or may not also be guarding a very tasty-looking rock that I wouldn't complain if I happened to eat," the worm admitted, making its intentions clear. Even if worm society was very altruistic and they believed in sharing, then there was still some greed when it came to unique, powerful natural treasures. The C-grades tended to monopolize these according to what the worm had told him, and the only exception was when a treasure was found that would allow another worm to break through to C-grade. Another C-grade among them was far more valuable than the limited growth of one of the existing C-grade worms, and often these treasures didn't really benefit one already in C-grade that much.

The rock the scorpion guarded was one that fit the criteria of both C-grades and those wanting to evolve being able to use it, according to his worm buddy. It was also one that no other worms dared go for due to the scorpions guarding it. Jake considered it for a moment before agreeing,

"Fine. Tell me everything you know about them," Jake answered as he at least wanted to go in with information.

While Jake had not lost his "fight" with Ell'Hakan because he was weaker, being stronger would potentially have allowed him to avoid getting thrown away entirely. No concept or advanced magic truly mattered before supreme power. If Jake had been a C-grade and just released a massive wave of destructive arcane mana, he would have broken any spell Ell'Hakan could ever conjure up.

Also... Jake still wanted levels, and doing some killing would surely do him good. He felt like he needed it too. Besides, he had the excuse of helping out the worm that was already helping him and the worm even mentioned this way would be faster. Did the worm specify how much faster or how much of a detour it would be? No, not at all. And he didn't ask either.

"Okay! So, the scorpions are not that large, only a few times bigger than you, and the most dangerous part is their stringer. The pinchers look dangerous, but they aren't actually that bad as they can't really

grab our skin... oh, but they could probably cut off your small parts. So also watch out for those. To make it worse is that their skin is not really skin but more like rock, and..."

Jake listened along as he considered if maybe fighting them wouldn't just be a quicker way to find out as, quite frankly, they just sounded like normal scorpions. Massive scorpions, but still scorpions.

Soon to be dead scorpions.

Caleb sat before the man that he knew had been the impetus of this entire conflict. Why the hell he had asked for a meeting was beyond him, but Caleb had agreed nonetheless. As the Judge of the Court of Shadows in this branch, he was obligated to. The reason was that the leader of the United Cities Alliance had not come to invade the Court. He had not even necessarily asked Caleb to meet.

He had simply approached them as a client.

Arthur sat across from Caleb in a small tent constructed between the group from the United Cities Alliance and Skyggen. Both had men stationed nearby, but Caleb wanted to avoid a fight if necessary. He had to admit that looking at Arthur, he wasn't sure if he could kill him. Not because he was strong or anything but due to the many items he possessed. Not that Caleb would let that show as he confidently spoke.

"I find it brave for you to meet me under four eyes like this," Caleb said.

"Why?" Arthur asked. "I am not meeting Caleb Thayne, the brother of the Malefic Viper's Chosen, but the Judge of the Court of Shadows. I am here as a client looking to hire the Court. Nothing more, nothing less."

"And yet you show up with an army," Caleb said a bit mockingly.

"I had to gauge the response. Let me make it clear right now, I feel for you, but your brother is not the man you once thought he was. I am sure you are aware of what the Order of the Malefic Viper is. It is an organization that is not about working together and prosperity but one of domination and death. Recently, after their Patron returned, what did they do to strengthen themselves? They forced every other faction on the planet that the Order was placed on to submit or die. Those who refused they slaughtered or enslaved. While you may hold the belief that your brother is not a person who would do that, I do not. I look at a history spanning trillion of years and see a pattern," Arthur said.

Caleb fell silent for a moment before answering. "I do not contest that the Order of the Malefic Viper has unpleasant means, but for there to be any conquest, there must be intent. Jake has absolutely no interest in taking control of this planet. He would rather have someone else become the World Leader than manage any of it himself. He is a fighter and a hunter through and through."

"As long as he remains, no other faction can gain control as he will always be here. Always hold influence. Even if he truly does not care, it doesn't mean others won't. Being the Chosen, there will be significant interest in our planet once they are aware he is from here. His lack of interest will only fuel their desire to take over our world if just to say they did. But let me concur for a moment that Jake Thayne is no threat. He is not the only reason for this. Can you say that others will not try to dominate our world? The Risen? Or, worse yet, the Holy Church?" Arthur asked.

"I don't know them that well," Caleb confessed. "The Risen, that is. The Holy Church will try to take over the planet; that is something I have no doubt in my mind about. It has been their MO since the very first Era. Which leads me to... isn't Jacob your son? You know, the leader of the Holy Church on Earth? Are you willing to kill your own son for fear of losing control of... what, a piece of rock floating in space?"

"Jacob is a prime example of what is wrong with these ideologies spawned from religion. He is now nothing more than a puppet. But you are right. Even if I got the opportunity, I could never bring myself to kill my own son, which is why I made sure he was not on the planet when all of this began. He is just a cog in the machine, and the Holy Church will gladly make use of him by just deploying him elsewhere. I hope he finds peace but never returns," Arthur explained.

Caleb listened along, not even aware that Jacob was off the planet. It kind of made sense based on the recent movements of the Church. Even so... Caleb still wasn't certain what the man wanted of him. "You still haven't said what you mean by coming here as a client."

Arthur smiled and took out a piece of paper. "I want to clarify that it is not that I despise all organizations run by gods. I would actually argue it makes sense in this world to have the highest echelon be made up of gods. My problem is with the religious aspects. The missions of these gods. The Court of Shadows is more a business than organized religion, and you operate not based on faith but a far more understandable concept: money. I am here to hire the Court of Shadows to assist the United Cities Alliance in our mission to take control of this planet by having you get rid of certain problematic characters that will stand in our way come voting for World Leader."

He handed Caleb the paper, which turned out to be a list, and Caleb took it almost instinctively. He skimmed some of the names but recognized only a scarce few as City Lords belonging to the Holy Church and City Lords who had refused to join any other faction. Notably absent was anyone Caleb actually knew.

"As I mentioned, then I understand. Even if this is all business, we are still humans. Asking you to hunt your own family or friends is something I know you couldn't do, even if it conflicts with the mission of the Court," Arthur said apologetically.

"But you still want me to assist you. You, who have allied with someone intending to kill my brother," Caleb said.

Arthur raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Kill? No, no. Killing Jake Thayne would be utterly moronic. I am not willing to gamble on someone from the Order of the Malefic Viper not suddenly deciding to pay us a visit in a century and blow up the planet just for slighting their god. But force him to abandon the planet? Now that is a whole other story. Now, if Ell'Hakan does manage to somehow slay him, I do not see it necessarily leading back to us but to him. This would not be my ideal outcome, but an acceptable one"

Caleb considered it for a moment and could see Jake just leave Earth altogether if he could no longer find a good reason to stay. He had already gone to the Order several times. There was still one problem, though: "Bold plan that still does not address the elephant in the room: Ell'Hakan."

"A means to an end. His intentions and mine are aligned in this, and he and his comrades will get what they want without it impacting humanity too negatively in the long run. There truly is no need to worry about Ell'Hakan. Don't think I allied with him out of desperation. Everything is in a system-enforced contract, and so far, he has stuck to the plan," Arthur said with little concern.

Caleb sighed, not believing Arthur had even a tenth as much control of the situation as he believed. "Let's say you succeed in forcing Jake off the planet, and your alien helper sticks to all his promises and leaves too once all this is done. What stops Jake from just coming back in the future? What stops the Order from still wanting to claim it?"

Arthur smiled confidently. "I do recognize that the multiverse is not a place where some fledgling faction can just emerge on its own without finding itself conquered. So I have found an ally. An ally that does not care about conquering the Earth and one with its Origin in humanity."

It took him a moment to figure it out as Caleb frowned. "Why the hell would they agree to that..."

"All want a foothold, and I offered them good terms. As long as I become World Leader, our deal stands," Arthur explained. "And Valhal is more than welcoming of any outside forces wishing to invade their land. Be it the Holy Church or the Order of the Malefic Viper."

Caleb frowned even deeper. He wanted to protest, but just then, he felt a prickle for the first time in a while. A divine message. As he heard the words, his eyes opened even wider than before as he gritted his teeth.

"As the Judge of the Court of Shadows, I accept your contract... but we are increasing the fee. Significantly," Caleb said with annoyance.

"If there is anything we do not lack, it is Credits," Arthur answered as he extended his hand for a shake. "May this be the start of a great working relationship."

Caleb looked at the hand before swatting it away. "I have no interest in any kind of relationship, professional or not. You are making a huge fucking mistake, and it will come back to bite you in the ass. The only reason I am accepting the contract is because I am the Judge. Being nice about it isn't in the job description."

Not seeming offended in the least, Arthur simply nodded. "Sometimes, we must do business we are not particularly fond of. Accept losses and do things we are not proud of in the moment, but that will lead to a greater future. That is what true leadership is about. I thank you for meeting me here today, Judge of the Court of Shadows. Be it with your blessing or not, I wish you luck in your task, and I genuinely do hope for a fortuitous future. For all of us."

With those words, Arthur took his leave as Caleb was left with a long list of names. He took out a special token and checked, only to quickly see that a contract had indeed been signed, not by him, but by



another Judge of the Court of Shadows. One not even in their fucking universe. All with the approval of Umbra.

"Fuck me," Caleb sighed as he stood up and went back towards Skyggen. Sometimes it really sucked to be a for-hire guild of assassins.

#### Chapter 526 - Painting The Desert Blue

Factions in the multiverse varied widely. Some factions integrated themselves nearly everywhere quite easily, such as the Court of Shadows. The Court of Shadows found themselves present even in territory and planets run by the Holy Church as long as they kept themselves covert. It was an unspoken agreement that the two factions had agreed upon for many eras and allowed the Church to get rid of individuals they would prefer not to send members after themselves. Let's just say there were many circumstances where having assassins for hire was just more convenient.

Valhal was also the sort of place that could have "halls" or small groups operate within other's territories without dominating land themselves. They did occupy some land – unlike the Court of Shadows, where none knew the true location of their headquarters – but not as much as others. The reason for this was simple.

One could be born into the Holy Church. Born into the Risen. Born into the Altmar Empire. But this was not true for Valhal, the Court of Shadows, or the Order of the Malefic Viper for that part. One could have an easier way in, but that did not mean one was born into it. They were organizations that people could join and leave, closer to companies or guilds than empires and countries. Granted, their member contracts could be limiting, but there was always a way out.

Most organizations were also reasonable to some extent. They respected some universal rules set in the multiverse. But... some organizations could not truly be classified. One, in particular, stood out largely due to its power.

Ell'Hakan had been warned that in Haven, there was one person he was not to interfere with no matter what. One person he should even actively make sure the United Cities Alliance did not bother either.

Because some factions were what could only be classified as utterly insane. Usually, factions like these would crumble and break apart as insanity was not a good attribute for a leader to have, but there was one major organization in the multiverse that, despite its insane methods, managed to thrive.

An organization that had wiped out entire species for looking too much like one of the gods they prayed to. One that willingly had its members go to the domains or sacred sites of their gods despite half dying in the process. One that would be crazy enough to start a war in which trillions would die and swear an eternal blood oath to wipe out you and anyone with a karmic connection to you from the multiverse... over a statue. A work-in-progress statue.

It was naturally the Primordial Church. And the one person Ell'Hakan had been warned about was none other than Felix, the sculptor who was apparently working on a statue of the Malefic Viper - a statue shown by the Chosen himself. This mattered particularly much because the Chosen had, according to rumors, been the first person to see the Viper in Eras. This meant that in the eyes of the Eternal Servant, the Chosen was the only one who had truly "seen" the Malefic One as he had met him both before and after he returned.

Ell'Hakan had been told all this directly by his Patron after the Eternal Servant himself had come to warn him. Warn him that the sculptor was to remain undisturbed until his task was complete. The Nahoom had not known what to think about this as he had honestly not even heard about this sculptor before arriving on Earth. In fact, he had been on his way to meet someone he had heard about and taken a particular interest in.

A certain man of technology by the name of Arnold.

A common misunderstanding was that spiders are insects. They weren't but were instead distant relatives of insects, being classified as arachnids. Another common misunderstanding was that scorpions were insects, but they were arachnids and far closer related to spiders than something like an ant.

On second thought, most people probably did know this, but Jake didn't. At least not the second part about scorpions being arachnids.

Post-system, these things were often mixed together, and these classifications kind of stopped mattering, but it was fun trivia nonetheless. One difference also did remain in the number of legs. Like spiders, scorpions had eight of them, and like spiders, these legs were honestly kind of weak and their joints rather exposed.

Jake leaped backward as he dodged the incredibly fast stinger aiming for him, quickly gaining distance from his large foe.

The scorpion had a sand-colored body, and its stinger stood more than twenty meters tall. It was an utterly monstrosity large body, and the pincers were large enough to snap a human in half if caught. Several humans at once, probably.

Plating covered its entire body, making it look like an invulnerable tank, and Jake did indeed discover that trying to damage its armored parts was useless, with even his Powershot blocked and only leaving a nick. Now, for the far smaller scorpions, Jake could still blow them apart, but the C-grade in question was the real deal.

[Giant Sandstream Scorpion Lord – lvl ???]

Jake slid back across the sand after dodging another attack and heard the cheerleading voice of the worm in the back of his head, despite it hiding several hundred meters down and kilometers away. Yes, these worms had a very impressive range when it came to their telepathy, and no, it did not want to contribute to the fight at all. Not like it needed to.

Throughout the battle, he had landed dozens of stabs with his katars, and it wasn't hard to hit the gaps between the armor with the occasional arrow. Their fight had been going on for a good while by now, and the difference was quite clear, even if there were some issues.

Streams of sand – probably what gave the massive scorpion its name – whirled around the scorpion and gathered as spear-like weapons that stabbed forward to try and catch out Jake. He easily dodged backward and took to the air as he bombarded the scorpion below with stable arcane arrows.

The scorpion angled itself to block with its chitin armor and formed a dome of sand around itself to stop his attacks while it tried to heal itself of some of the poison in its body. Jake smirked and simply began charging Arcane Powershot, having already seen the scorpion's lack of ability to block it with its sand magic.

As expected, it penetrated the wall of sand and struck the scorpion in the stinger, making it screech in pain as even more poison was delivered into its system. Now, Jake mentioned issues, and one issue was that he had wasted an entire bottle of his special soul poison.

Turns out that it sucked against large foes due to the far larger Soulshape, and the scorpion also had significant innate poison resistance. Enough for him to not be able to build up a proper charge before triggering it. This is why he had just returned back to hemotoxins to at least make it bleed a bit more. Oh, another funny fact was that scorpions had blue blood. This had no impact on the fight besides the sand taking on a new color. It was just a bit of trivia.

Thinking about it, this was Jake's third time fighting a C-grade. The first had been the Phantomshade Panther and the second the mushroom man he obliterated together with Draskil. No, he didn't count the termites. And as the fight with the scorpion continued, it became clear this specimen was weaker than both of the C-grades he had truly faced before.

Moreover, Jake was stronger than he had been then. To add further, then the scorpion was not that well matched up against Jake due to his ranged options. It seemed that these scorpions nearly only fought melee foes, and those they fought with ranged options, their sand magic could face. He had noticed a distinct lack of flying creatures anywhere in the desert, but that was likely due to the one-sided nature of the environment. Birds with the earth affinity were super rare for hopefully obvious reasons.

So just flying around and keeping his distance allowed Jake to whittle down the massive scorpion a little at a time. Still, it wasn't entirely one-sided and definitely not a fast fight.

Jake shot a barrage of explosive arrows as the scorpion had dispelled its wall of sand and moved to attack. The stinger struck forward and penetrated into the sand Jake had just been flying above. A black liquid was excreted that somehow pulsed through the sand, and Jake felt it continue through it to hit anything hiding below ground.

All he had to do to avoid it was not touch the sand, making Jake never stay on the ground. It was also smart to not stand on it as it gave him more time to dodge the sand manipulation.

The scorpion wasn't stupid – no C-grades were – and knew it was in a very disadvantageous situation. After Jake managed to blow one of its legs off, the scorpion decided it was time to leave as it attempted to dig into the sand and get away.

Jake reacted quickly and did something many would probably find incredibly wasteful. Flying down, Jake smashed both his fists into the ground as he released massive amounts of stable arcane mana into the

sand. The scorpion tried to manipulate the sand but found itself unable to move it as Jake had effectively frozen the ground with pure stability. This did not mean the scorpion couldn't use sand anymore, as it was able to summon it out of thin air, but it sure as hell wasn't going to dig anywhere.

Also realizing that Jake was faster, it chose to stand its ground as it finally went all out. Its entire body suddenly began shaking as Jake saw parts of it turn into sand. Jake frowned as the stinger seemed to disintegrate and simply become one with the desert below. Soon after, its pinchers followed.

His danger sense exploded as Jake jumped, only to barely avoid a stinger emerging. A stream of sand went towards him, and he dodged out of the way, only for a pincher to pop out of the sand flying in mid-air.

Looking down, he saw the scorpion's stinger, and both claws were entirely gone as it just looked like just a big mound of armor, its joints also gone. Yet it still moved its amputated limbs, and in tandem, these limbs were summoned from any sand all around Jake.

It was actually a really cool trick and probably how it had hunted down so many worms who dared enter its area. Too bad its sneak attacks didn't work on Jake as sneak attacks tended to not work on Jake.

Deciding to finish the fight, Jake dove down towards the main body of the scorpion, dodging all attacks on the way. Arrows didn't do the job as its armor seemed even stronger in this form, leaving not a single opening. All it had were a few stumps sticking out, which were also covered in armor, making it like trying to hit a safe.

Jake had a way around that as he landed on the scorpion and pressed his hands to its body. Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, and the poison went straight into the armor and began corroding it. Dark green cracks appeared within seconds, and Jake felt it turn brittle enough for a good punch to break it.

To the scorpion's credit, it also swiftly reacted in a way that Jake had not expected. Sand appeared on both sides as two massive pinchers appeared and tried to rip Jake off, making him dodge under them and smirk as he kept pumping in poison. The stinger then regrew instantly, but not on the tail as expected but out of the damn armor right behind Jake. It was a far smaller version of it, but it also moved faster than Jake was ready for.

He was hit on the back as the stinger pumped deadly venom into him. Jake reacted by pumping more poison into the scorpion. While Jake found his poison relatively ineffective at actually doing damage to the scorpion, the C-grade also quickly discovered it had little luck.

Jake did have to admit that the venom was stronger than anything he could make as his skin turned black and his insides began turning to mush. Emphasis on began. Nearly all other D-grades, even peak D-grades, would find themselves turned into piles of goo within a second of being struck with the stinger. It was a true kill-move that sadly relied on something Jake was very resistant to.

Both of them pumped toxins into the other for several more seconds before Jake had to disengage. Eternal Hunger – in its katar form – was summoned as he punched straight down. It penetrated the armor of the scorpion after it had been weakened and made cracks spread. Several more hits shattered a huge part of the armor as Jake finally cut off the stinger and took to the air.

The scorpion tried to roll over and protect its newly-made weak point, but Jake was not having any of it. He used Gaze of the Apex Hunter as a large arrow appeared from his quiver. One he had been saving for this moment. It was naturally Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

Frozen, the scorpion could not move in time as Jake shot down the arrow. It hit right in the weak spot and sank into the scorpion's body, creating an even bigger hole and sending out an intense wave of energy that ravaged its insides. Jake followed up with a few explosive arcane arrows that hit inside the hole and hence exploded inside the scorpion's body.

It struggled and writhed in pain, but it was too late. Jake activated Mark of the Avaricious Hunter as the scorpion flashed with arcane light for a brief second, making it screech out in pain more. All it took after that was a few more well-placed arrows and a bit of time.

A minute later, the building-sized scorpion finally collapsed on the sand as Jake got a notification.

\*You have slain [Giant Sandstream Scorpion Lord – lvl 202] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 174 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

He didn’t know if he should be annoyed or not at only getting a single level from a kill on a damn C-grade. Then again, it had only been a good half an hour’s work. A bit longer if you also counted the forty or so D-grades, Jake had to kill before he faced the Scorpion Lord, but he barely counted those due to how easy they were.

Sitting down on the sand, Jake took out a health potion and quickly drank it as he closed his eyes and focused on eliminating the venom still in his body. It would take a while, and during the process, he had to keep Arcane Awakening active, so he was in a bit of a hurry. He had not taken that much damage during the fight itself besides the last attack, but he was still tired as hell and would need some rest.

Focusing while in meditation, Jake practiced actively using Palate to eliminate the poison in his body as he waited for a certain worm to be brave enough to come over.



Minutes passed as Jake stabilized himself enough to move properly. He had still taken immense internal damage from that last stinger attack and felt like it would probably take a few hours before he was back in peak condition.

"You did it!" he heard the happy voice of the worm say from afar. Jake had also finally stopped tuning the worm out, as it had constantly been bombarding him with: "Watch out!" and "Hit now!" and... well, that kind of thing. He had never had a backseat warrior while fighting before, and he would prefer to never ever have one again.

"That I did," Jake answered. He already felt the worm move closer, making Jake also head to their target.

A large stone was standing there in the middle of the desert. Somehow it stood upright and looked like a tall, slender boulder that someone had placed there. On it was a few natural markings, and it did give off an intense amount of earth affinity energy as well as something else Jake could not quite recognize, even if it did feel like a familiar concept. Jake had no idea what it was, but he could see why the worm wanted it.

"Now that the Scorpion Lord is dead, you got all you wanted, and we can move on?" Jake asked.

"Well... about that..." the worm began, embarrassed.

"There is more than one C-grade scorpion, isn't there?"

"Maaybe? A few?"

"And more stones too?" Jake asked with a sigh.

"Now, that would be a happy coincidence... imagine if there were several of these stones which were kind of maybe linked or something, and getting all of them would be super good or something like that. That would be crazy."

"Are you still trying to claim this way is faster?" Jake asked with exasperation but also had to admit he found the entire situation amusing. He had planned to take advantage of the worm to transport him, and there he was working as a mercenary for his driver.

"Well, that depends... C-grades are a lot faster than D-grades, you know? And I am sure I would be super fast if I somehow happened to reach C-grade, which would definitely speed up the journey, and to do that... you know, you can kill scorpions, and I can eat stones. Seems like a perfect fit," the worm argued.

Jake just closed his eyes, tilted his head, and stared at the sky above.

Guess I am painting the desert blue with scorpion blood.

Chapter 527 - A Sandy Sand Worm

After the initial panic from having the entire teleportation network destroyed, things in the many cities across Earth were pretty calm again for a while. Most didn't even know why the attack had happened, and those who did quickly moved to apprehend those responsible or to calm the masses. The cities belonging to the United Cities Alliance also willingly destroyed their own teleporters to sabotage the forces of Earth after making sure that they were ready internally.

Food had been stocked up if they still needed that, and defenses had been strengthened. They also had enough materials stocked up for their crafters to tide over the coming conflict. In time the teleportation network would be re-established, so they just had to wait.

One of the issues the teleportation network had helped address was the beasts and other monsters attacking settlements, but that wasn't really that big an issue anymore. The beasts had been united by stronger alphas, and large groups had been formed, none of which attacked human settlements. Especially not after the last World Congress, where they had voted on the Unusual Unions Path, which had resulted in many people evolving into classes that worked well with beasts or professions that could make things beasts wanted. This had even formed diplomatic relationships between many cities and beast hordes as they had begun to be called.

All of this is to say that the only beasts who bothered cities were solitary ones or smaller packs. Sometimes natural phenomena also spawned elementals or the like that attacked cities, but nothing large or organized. There were also many D-grades around by now, and even the weakest cities had a few. This is why what came next was a massive surprise to many.

A guard stood bored in a tall watchtower and looked all around. He hadn't seen anything try to attack for over a month, and his only real job these days was to report whenever caravans or something, anything, approached. He had thought that with the destruction of the teleporters, he would have more work, but that clearly wasn't the case. Not that no work wasn't good. They were just a small settlement who were lucky to have a Pylon with about four thousand people living there, of which only five were D-grade. So nothing was probably the best outcome.

As he stretched a bit and looked to the side, he saw some dust being kicked up. The land was dry all around, and he wondered if it was another dust storm. Those could be nasty and sometimes even had a few elementals in them.

Yet as he saw it come closer, he froze. A massive form emerged from the dust cloud, tens of meters tall. It looked like a massive moose and was no doubt well in the D-grade. Behind it, hundreds of smaller beasts were revealed, all charging with their leader. All of these were E-grades, but some D-grades were also there. The guard doubted his eyes for several moments before he collected himself and yelled: "Attack! We're under attack!"

With slight panic, he sounded all the alarms as the town went into lockdown. The D-grades present, who had simply been working on their professions, hurried out, and the City Lord rushed up the watch tower. Standing beside the guard, he stared out and also saw the beasts.

"Get everyone ready," the City Lord said with fear as he gritted his teeth.

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Similar scenes played out all over the planet. No beast tides had been seen for many months, but now they had suddenly restarted. The fragile peace that had been established by the most powerful monsters crumbled in seconds as if a spark had been lit.

Or, more accurately, like what had been holding them back had disappeared.

Thousands of cities suddenly found themselves unprepared after having relaxed their defenses following the last World Congress. Armies of elementals, tides of beasts, and other monsters took advantage of the stockpiles of resources in all these cities. Their attacks were indiscriminatory and went for every faction. The Holy Church, Noboru Clan, United Cities Alliance, or completely unaffiliated factions or individual cities found themselves under assault.

Nobody seemed to know the trigger for this, and quite frankly, most didn't have time to care. All they knew was that the monsters humanity had finally begun to soften up to suddenly did a one-eighty and once more viewed human settlements as nothing more than food and experience sources.

Jake didn't know why it kept happening... okay, he did know; he just felt a bit weird about it. Why was it that whenever Jake entered a new area with a new type of monster, it turned into Jake effectively committing genocide?

The worm was happy, sure, and Jake wasn't that sad about it as they still made good progress. Both in levels and distance. All the Scorpion Lords were of roughly equal strength, and what little variance they did have wasn't of any consequence as Jake grew stronger and more accustomed to them between every kill. Moreover, after the first kill, Jake was familiar enough with the scorpions to open every fight with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, instantly giving him an advantage.

There ended up being a total of nine stones and nine C-grade Scorpion Lords. Along with the hundreds of high and peak tier D-grades Jake also ended up killing, he had truly done a number on the local scorpion population. In some ways, he had been lucky to stumble across so many weak C-grades to hunt. They were barely evolved, he was a good matchup, plus they were weak for their grade.

This hunting spree had also naturally led to quite a few levels gained.

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 175 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 179 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 176 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 177 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 180 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 178 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

As always, his leveling speed slowed down the more of the same enemies he killed, and the fights got easier. But it was inarguable that hunting C-grades was way, way more effective than D-grades. Not once had he gained a level after a D-grade kill despite killing hundreds, and every level came after a C-grade.

Now, finally, they had the stones the worm wanted. Jake had taken the second they came across for himself temporarily as he had eaten it with Palate of the Malefic Viper to get an idea of what they were and how they worked. He had it eaten for around six days before they reached the final rock, and during this time, Jake got some idea of what they were.

Meteorites.

The concept he had felt from them was some kind of space affinity or maybe astral affinity. Gravity affinity? A mix of it all, probably. Either way, they contained powerful energies. Jake could likely find some ways to use the meteors himself, but it would take a lot of work, and he had already promised the worm.

The entire hunt had only taken roughly a week, during which they made it a few thousand kilometers into the scorpion territory. Each of the stones was above five meters tall and one and a half meters across, making them small enough for Jake to store in his spatial storage. The worm had made it clear that all of them had to be gathered before eating.

Standing before the final stone with a dead Scorpion Lord in the background, Jake turned to the very excited worm. It had only popped out the top parts of its body, making it look like a hill had just emerged next to Jake with the worm's mouth closed.

"So, here we are," Jake said as he stood in front of the meteorite.

"Yep..." the worm said a bit nervously.

"Relax, I am not going to take your meteorites. I feel these were once part of one large meteorite and broke part when they entered our atmosphere. Or maybe something else broke them," Jake shared his observations and some insight from Palate.

"Yeah, one of the big worms said that these stones were once united, and to bring out their full power, one had to bring them together again. The scorpions were just dumb and didn't like each other, so they never shared. Not like the stones aren't good individually, just best together," the worm answered.

They had spoken only a bit over this last week, but it was mainly about random unrelated topics and for Jake to learn about worms. Jake had spent most of his time meditating and trying to figure out how to upgrade Wings of the Malefic Viper between recovering between fights, leaving not enough time to have any long talks.

"I have been thinking," Jake asked. "Do worms have genders?"

He knew that earthworms pre-system were hermaphrodites, and he had been wondering if maybe these worms were too.

"Worms are worms," the worm answered very accurately. "Ah, but the big ones can decide, I heard. They got a skill to change shape or something and using that skill, they kind of make a preferred form that can have a sex. Not sure why they would. Do humans have genders? Wait, let me guess, they do, and you are a... female?"

"Missed the fifty-fifty," Jake chuckled.

"Really? I thought you had to be a female due to your mushy and soft form. Males are meant to look strong and rough, right?" the worm asked. The words sounded a bit insulting, but Jake felt not the slightest amount of mockery in the tone, just genuine curiosity.

"Females are even mushier and softer," Jake answered, feeling a bit weird about saying that out loud. Telepathically. Wanting to change the topic, he asked something else. "I don't think I ever got a name either. What do other worms call you?"

"What?" the worm asked, even more confused.

"You know, a name. A way to identify who you are and differentiate you from other worms," Jake clarified.



"I am a Sand Worm," the worm asked before it seemed to get it. "Wait... oh, I think I get it! Like, what we call stuff we find or something? A made-up term, umm, name?"

"Exactly!" Jake said, glad he got through.

"We don't have those. Seems kind of dumb; why do you need them? Any worm can differentiate another worm in the network, and our soul signatures are entirely unique, so if we want to mention a specific worm, we just relay their soul signature. Way better than names, I think," the worm explained.

"I... that is actually super fucking smart," Jake admitted as he thought about it. He could identify people using only their mana signature, which was part of their soul signature and was utterly unique. If the worms could relay this signature using telepathy and only spoke using telepathy, then why the hell would they need names? At least not between them. They only had to give names to dead objects and Identify provided ones for free just by using the skill.

"Right?" the worm said happily.

"But I still want you to have one," Jake stated.

"Why?"

"For when I meet other people in the future, and for my own internal thoughts, I want to have a name to refer to you as," Jake explained.

“Humans are weird. Do all humans have names? What is your name?” the worm asked.

“My name is Jake, and yes, all humans have names. At least all humans I know,” he answered.

“Oh... so does that mean I should call you human Jake? Or, wait, are you a Jake and not a human then? Like, my Identify does not work on you, and is that because you are a Jake? And are there more Jakes out there like you?” the worm asked, clearly not entirely getting the concept of names.

“No, no. There is only one of me, and Jake is nothing but a name. I am a human, and my name has nothing to do with my strength or anything; it is just something my parents gave me. That is how names work. They are given by someone close to you, most likely your parents, and then you have that name until you die or decide to change it,” Jake tried to explain.

“So I could just get a name if I wanted? Just by saying I am suddenly supposed to be called something else and not Sand Worm?” the worm asked very interestedly.

“Yes,” Jake said.

“What should I pick then... how about Super Sand Worm? Or maybe Best Sand Worm? Oh, I know, Awesome Sand Worm!” the massive worm spoke out loud as Jake saw the mound that stuck out of the ground wriggle slightly.

“... maybe think about it a bit more after you have heard other names to get an idea?” Jake asked with exasperation.

"Are my ideas bad? Oh well. Wait, you said that names are given, right? Can't you just give me one?" the worm asked.

"I am not sure that would be a good idea. I have repeatedly been told that I am bad at giving names," Jake tried to argue.

"So you have given names before! That must mean you are experienced at it. Just give me one then," the worm said. "But after you give me a name, can you let me have the tasty rocks? You said that people give names to those they care about, so if you give me a name, it must also mean you care about me, right? Or doesn't it work both ways?"

Jake felt like there were several leaps in logic with that argument but didn't bother trying to correct it. Instead, he thought of a name. The first thing that sprung to mind was Wormie, but his vast experience of naming things made him know he was not allowed to do that. Not anymore.

He also knew it had to be a unisex name. Thinking long and hard on the issue, Jake took inspiration from the environment and the worm in front of him as he settled on a perfect name. A name that was actually a real name, a historically unisex name, and a name that would truly fit the worm in his eyes.

"Let's just call you Sandy," Jake said with pride. Truly his naming sense had improved by leaps and bounds since the day he named Hawkie.

"Doesn't sandy mean that something is made of sand or is like sand? I am pretty sure it is. Like, this place is sandy," the worm asked, confused.

“Ah, but it is also a name,” Jake said. “And even so, aren’t you kind of sandy? So it even helps describe you, doesn’t it?”

“Hm, I am sandy... okay! I am Sandy from now on. Hello human Jake, I am worm Sandy!” the worm, now named Sandy, greeted him as he heard something akin to a giggle. “He he, this is weird. Sandy, Sandy, Sandy... what happens if I forget it, though?”

“I will remember it for you,” Jake assured the cutely nervous worm. “Now for the true bounty. Are you ready for your stones?”

“Yep!” the worm said expectedly. “Sandy is ready!”

Sandy had managed to reach level 199 over this last week primarily by stealing things from the dead scorpions, and Jake had a strong feeling it was ready for evolution. Sandy was also certain it was ready to evolve, and the meteorites certainly weren’t ordinary items.

Jake took out the meteorites from his inventory, and the moment he did, they flew towards each other right in front of him. Jake was sent scrambling back as a loud crack was heard, and the meteorites merged into each other. Taking precautions, Jake stepped back the moment he took out the final meteorite from Palate, but luckily it simply flew to the larger one and merged with it.

The second all the meteorites were gathered, a pulse was sent out, and the entire area seemed to shake. Jake was curious and walked closer to it, feeling pulled as he got closer.

“You won’t take it?” Sandy asked nervously.

“No...” Jake answered. “But give me a second.”

“Hurry! I can already feel that others are coming,” the worm warned.

Jake nodded as he placed his hand on the meteorite. It felt hot to the touch, and it was as if his hand stuck to it. He wouldn’t say he felt connected to it, but he did feel a call of sorts. He now realized the meteorite didn’t only feel familiar due to the affinities of energy. There was something else. Something that resonated with him.

Closing his eyes, Jake activated Touch of the Malefic Viper almost instinctively as he sent some of his energy into the meteorite to connect with his energy. He wanted to make it better, and he felt part of himself be drained. Like in a trance, he infused it with energy until a distinct sense of weakness overtook his body.

He fell to his knees as he was knocked out of his trance and checked his resources in horror.

Status

Mana Points (MP): 249 /102437

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What the fuck did I just do? Jake asked himself.

“What did you just do?” the worm also asked him.

“I am not sure,” Jake said with furrowed brows. “But hurry up.”

“Okay!” Sandy said as it dove underground for a moment before emerging right in front of Jake, swallowing the meteorite whole. It had not grown despite them merging but had turned into a darker color.

Jake tried to stabilize himself and looked as Sandy froze. Minutes passed, and Jake quickly took out a mana potion to at least be able to stand up properly and look intimidating if other beasts came. It was good that the corpse was still near, and Jake could pose until Sandy was ready.

“So?” Jake asked the worm after it seemed frozen for over five minutes.

Another minute passed before Sandy’s entire body shook.

“Be right back!”

With that, the entire Sand Worm disappeared, leaving a large hole in the ground that rapidly began to get filled with sand again. Sandy was entirely gone, having no-doubt gone to that special evolution place.

And not even Villy knew what Sandy would return as.

#### Chapter 528 - A Whole New Worm

Jake waited expectedly for Sandy to return. As he waited, he also considered an option he hadn't even thought of before... what if Sandy turned hostile? There was a legitimate risk that the worm would return stronger than Jake was as the evolution could lead to intense power growth. No, it would definitely lead to immense power growth.

Moreover, Sandy didn't need him anymore. He had helped the worm reach C-grade and even went and did something incredibly stupid like pour all his mana into the damn meteorite. Oh, and then there was the issue of C-grades apparently coming, and as he stood there, Jake could even feel a few approaching auras.

Did I fuck up badly? Jake asked himself.

He had originally only approached the worm to give him a lift. Their entire relationship had been transactional. Shit, Jake had even threatened Sandy. He knew that if someone else had threatened him to either help or die, Jake would have fought or at the very least looked for every opportunity possible to strike back.

Feeling genuinely nervous, Jake considered just taking off on his own. He was damn low on mana and didn't wanna fight any C-grades showing up, so leaving would probably be safer. Logically, he should leave or at least hide.

Yet he stayed there, waiting. Because despite his worries, he had a good feeling about Sandy. Sandy seemed like a decent worm, and unless Ell'Hakan could somehow mess with Jake's emotions across the planet, he felt confident in that assessment. Not that he would have time to get away as Sandy was back.

A figure appeared, slowly fading into existence. Instantly, Jake noticed the difference. First of all, Sandy's body had actually grown a little smaller, now "only" about a hundred meters long. The body was also less bulky, with the entire form quite slender. Color-wise, Sandy had taken on an odd black-purple hue with the occasional small glimmering dot here and there, looking like small diamonds were embedded in the skin. The skin itself also looked far tougher than before, now more like rock than simply very rough skin.

But what struck Jake the most was the aura. He felt as if the area around Sandy was bending slightly and looked off, and he saw some of the sand slowly begin to float up towards the worm. Sandy noticed and stopped attracting it and began to twist and turn to check out its own body. Another difference was that all of this took place up in the air, Sandy moving as if somehow still "swimming."

Jake used Identify on Sandy, trying to get a feeling for what he was dealing with.

[Juvenile Cosmic Genesis Worm – lvl ???]

Jake stared at the name, not at all sure what to make of it. First of all, it was long. Were long names good? Probably. But more than the number of words were the words used. Cosmic and Genesis were both words that certainly held a lot of "power," and the juvenile part hinted that a fully grown Cosmic Genesis Worm had to be at least B-grade. Those trying to become dragons became true dragons at B-grade, indicating that a Cosmic Genesis Worm was likely at or around the level of a true dragon.



And true dragons were damn strong.

“Hey, Sandy. You well?” Jake asked as he saw Sandy keep twisting and turning.

“It looks funny when it moves,” Sandy answered in a very amused tone.

Jake looked confused around and saw nothing move besides the giant worm as he asked again.

“What does?”

“The air sand. Umm... just a bit, checking the skill... hmm, cosmic dust it calls it. And sand is pretty much dust, right? You can’t see it? It is everywhere, even all around you, right now. Look, like this,” Sandy said.

As Sandy said this, Jake faintly felt space around him faintly begin to harden as if it became denser. He wrapped his hand in destructive arcane mana and swept it sideways as he destroyed whatever Sandy was doing.

“You can see it! Or maybe feel it? Hm, weird. Anywho, what did you do with the meteorite before? The amount of earth affinity was near-eliminated, and some foreign concept I am not familiar with was just overflowing. Ah, don’t get me wrong, I am not complaining or anything. I am way better now. Oh, did you know I had five evolution options, and only two of them didn’t have sand in the name? Also! Who is the Malefic Viper?” Sandy asked with rapid-fire telepathy.

Jake couldn't help but just smile a bit. He had to admit that Sandy felt strong now, but Jake didn't feel the slightest hint of danger. It wasn't necessarily because the newly born Cosmic Genesis Worm couldn't threaten him, but there was not a hint of animosity. All he felt was relief at Sandy not changing.

He answered her questions, explaining who Villy was in quick terms, and was glad that Sandy knew what gods were as apparently a few worms had been blessed. As for why Sandy asked... some-fucking-how, an option called "Malefic Transport Worm" had appeared, and it was better than any of the three "expected" evolutions. The description had talked about turning Sandy into a living transportation vehicle or some shit like that, and thank fucking Villy Sandy had not picked that.

"Cool, so you are the Chosen best friend of this god? Sounds super nice," Sandy said. "Oh! Bummer! I totally forgot!"

Jake knew what Sandy had forgotten as the many auras had been approaching for a while, and now one was close enough. In the distance, a large form rose, far larger than Sandy despite them both being C-grade worms. It was one of the massive C-grade Sand Worms, and it faced the flying worm for a while as they no doubt talked telepathically.

Now, it had to be noted that all Sand Worms were blind. Blind and deaf. But they had some magical sense that gave them a huge sensory range anyway. For the Sand Worms, it was through the sand, and Jake guessed that Sandy had retained that same sense... sand, having been replaced with this cosmic dust, which was essentially space? He wasn't sure.

Time passed as Jake just stood there waiting. Sandy sometimes made some slight movements but was otherwise completely frozen. He felt a bit out of place but didn't want to disturb their talk. Things seemed to get heated as both worms wriggled at each other before Sandy spoke to him:

"We're leaving!" the former Sand Worm said in a huffy tone.

“What happened?” Jake asked, confused.

“Get in my mouth!” the worm just angrily said, clearly more than a little upset.

Jake didn’t want to argue. Sandy opened its mouth and breathed in as Jake felt himself be dragged. He could resist it but wanted to see what kind of new things the worm could now do. Yet, at the same time, Jake felt a faint telepathic connection be established with the massive C-grade in the distance. It was only one-way and just translated to a brief message: “Thank you and take care of them. Show them the world.”

Not sure what to make of it, Jake allowed himself to be dragged in, and he noticed that despite Sandy growing smaller, the inside hadn’t. It looked like a massive dark cave as Jake stared down the worm’s gullet, but the moment he fully entered the mouth, he felt himself shift and next-up found himself within an odd circular room that looked like it was made of stone.

A spatial pocket of some kind, Jake noted.

Inspecting his new surroundings, Jake quickly realized there was no way out. No doors or openings in the dark-purplish rock anywhere. Yet he also got a feeling that he could break these walls if he really wanted to by overloading the walls with destructive mana - overloading the entire pocket with destructive mana.

After roughly a minute, he heard Sandy talk again.

"I would never! Jerks, the lot of them! Sand Worms suck!" Sandy said first-thing.

"Will you tell me what happened now?" Jake asked.

"Okay... I was so excited, right? Just evolved, everything seemed great, and then my old safe keeper appeared, and I am so excited to share my own awesome evolution, but do you know what the bastard said? That I am no longer a Sand Worm and have to leave! That the desert isn't a place for me anymore. I just got disowned by my own family because I am a better worm! Humph!" Sandy raged.

Jake frowned a bit but now understood the other C-grade worm. Sandy had grown beyond the desert. Rather than being confined to sand, their world was now everywhere in the cosmos.

"This is your fault? I could have become a Massive Veilsand Sand Worm, you know?" Sandy said, sounding sad. "Now, where am I supposed to go? Can I even go anywhere? My quest says I am still not allowed in certain areas of the planet."

"The world is far larger than you think," Jake said. "You are a Cosmic Worm now, not a Sand Worm. The entire universe is your home, and while there are some areas you cannot go to right now, that is only temporary."

"Still your fault," Sandy insisted. "Guess it all works out for you... now I have nowhere else to go and no other plans. So, where are we going?"

Jake couldn't help but smile at the speed Sandy just adapted. "Before that, can you do it so I can see the outside world?"

"See? Oh yeah, you got those eye things; I remember someone mentioning that some creatures have those. Here, let me try something."

The entire cavern-like dome he was in began shifting colors and expanded and retracted a bit. Then, finally, parts of it began to turn transparent. It then spread and encompassed the entire cave, walls, floor, and everything. From Jake's point of view, it was like he was floating in mid-air.

"That works?" Sandy asked.

"Yep. I do wonder, why do you have a skill to transport people like this?"

"Oh, it is not to transport people but to trap and super slowly eat them. Like, I can do this," Sandy said as Jake began to feel something change. He noticed that his mana, stamina, and health were all being drained at an incredibly slow speed but drained nonetheless. It stopped just after as Sandy gave some more insight.

It was a bit like Villy's Palate, where one could slowly absorb energy and even some remnant Records, except Sandy would drink the energies of living beings eaten and actually extract experience from that. From the sounds of it, Sandy still got little to no experience from killing things outright but was more about finding and eating natural treasures. And eating living creatures to slowly extract energy from them, it seemed.

"How many can you eat at once?" Jake asked.

“Depends on how many rooms I make... but probably around a hundred rooms right now? Not sure; I am going by my guts. Heh, guts when I am talking about my stomach skill. Anyway! Where are we going?” Sandy asked again after making a terrible pun.

“That way,” Jake said as he telepathically conveyed a direction. Sandy picked up on it and began worming through the air. It was like Sandy could swim through the air itself, though Jake to admit the speed was not that impressive right off the bat.

Jake decided to not rush Sandy as he could feel the worm was getting used to the new evolution. Instead, he wanted to test something else out as he took out his cauldron and began crafting a batch of mana potions. The process was simple as usual, but his goal wasn’t really to brew it but test the effect it had on Sandy.

“Hey, Sandy, can you absorb the extra mana from me doing alchemy?” Jake asked the worm as it wormed its way forward.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I do feel something in the stomach. I have to absorb it manually as I don’t have that effect active right now,” Sandy said. Jake once more felt the suction effect from the walls, and the mana that had spread in the room from Jake’s crafting was absorbed.

“Okay, now let’s try something else. Do be on alert and tell me if anything bad happens,” Jake then said as he tried to craft something a bit different.

Whenever Jake made poison, it had the effect of leaving the surrounding area a bit... contaminated. Back in his valley, he had his circle of death where he killed all grass in a large area, and in the Order and

even his lab back in Haven, the entire place was designed to resist and contain his poison. This entire effect only got worse as time passed, and Jake knew that if an S-grade crafted poisons without bothering to try and contain the environmental effects, entire planets could find themselves contaminated.

He began his crafting as usual and felt that Sandy was keeping an eye on it. The toxic vapors soon entered the air without the worm saying anything about it. As he kept going, he felt a bit of it be absorbed into the transparent walls and disappear. Still nothing. Jake finished his crafting and finally asked:

“So?”

“All fine? The energy took a bit to filter, but otherwise, it was all good,” Sandy answered. Jake felt relieved and nodded.

“How far are we going anyway?” Sandy asked.

“Hm... far,” Jake answered. He had not actually truly reflected on how far there was... and damn, was there far.

Due to the size of the Earth having grown to ridiculous levels and him having been flung to the other side of the planet, Jake estimated he had a little less than two million kilometers back to Haven.

Now, this did seem extreme, but it wasn't actually that bad. Jake could easily travel faster than a thousand kilometers an hour using One Step Mile repeatedly, so without rest, he could pass around twenty-four thousand kilometers a day or just shy of one hundred and seventy thousand a week. Factoring in fights and some issues, along with a bit of rest here and there, passing just a hundred

thousand kilometers a week was likely more realistic. This would mean it would take Jake around five months to return... which happened to be just shy of the World Congress that would happen in roughly four months. At least he remembered it being in around four months. He did not have a timer counting down or anything, and he had to admit that his time-keeping when highly engrossed in alchemy wasn't the best.

"Damn far. I have around two million kilometers, and I am not sure how much of that you can come along for, being a C-grade and all," Jake answered.

"Hm, okay," Sandy answered. "Do we have to hurry?"

"A little? But I also think it would be a good idea to make some stops along the way to hunt some C-grades," Jake said. "It all depends on how fast you can travel."

"So I can go fast?" Sandy asked.

"Well, yeah. Is it fine if I just do alchemy and meditate meanwhile?"

"Is alchemy that the thing where you make the mana come out? Sure! It is tasty. I want to practice too," Sandy answered.

"Alright," Jake said with a smile. Sandy was currently flying only about two hundred meters a second, which was slower than Jake using One Step by a lot. He hoped that Sandy would be fast-



Everything suddenly seemed to warp as Jake saw the terrain all around them move incredibly fast. Sandy shot forward as if digging through reality, carried by space itself. He had no way to estimate how fast they were going... but it was fast. Faster than Jake could travel even if he pushed himself fully with One Step and Arcane Awakening.

"Can you keep up this speed?" Jake asked, wondering if Sandy was pushing it.

"Yeah? This isn't that fast, is it? Definitely faster than before, but I am an awesome worm now, so it makes sense, right? I can go faster but not for as long, and I am still learning, okay? So no judging," Sandy explained very logically.

"Alright. Don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything," Jake said.

"I will tell you when I need someone to kill another C-grade so I can steal its stuff, and I can get some proper compensation for you getting me disowned," Sandy said with the usual joking sassiness

"You do you," Jake kept smirking as he watched them fly for a little longer. Even if their speed was a lot faster, it was still just desert with a few large red rocky mountains all around for as far as the eye could see. Even Jake's eyes.

Closing said eyes and entering meditation, Jake began once more working on upgrading Wings of the Malefic Viper. Over this period, he had gotten some good ideas, but the problem was he had no way to practice. In order to truly practice and figure out if his ideas would work, Jake would need some kind of isolated space which he could try and escape from, but where the hell would he find something like tha-

Wait a second...

## Chapter 529 - Searching For A Path

At the higher grades and levels of power, the scaling of survivability and damage output was not balanced. Killing an F-grade human as another F-grade human was easy. Just stab them in the heart, and they die.

For an E-grade, you had to stab them a few times in the heart and maybe land a few more blows before they went down for good. D-grade it got even harder, and nothing short of blowing off the head of another man would work as an instant kill. And even then, many could survive losing their head dependent on their skills and stat distribution.

C-grades losing their head rarely meant death. The Soulshape became stronger and easier to regenerate, and each part of it was less vital than in prior grades. Even the functions of the brain were all gone by C-grade, allowing one who had lost their head to keep moving. Sensory organs still mattered, and regenerating the brain and head was a huge burden, but most humans could overcome it.

Now, this was humans. Beasts were even harder to kill, with elementals harder than beasts. Due to how survivability scaled, it meant that the other party escaping was the likely outcome unless one party was at least a good deal stronger. Assuming the losing side decided to flee, that is.

All of this ultimately resulted in that when two beings of similar or equal power met, there would be no true winner. This was doubly true when the two beings facing off were Unique Lifeforms at the peak of D-grade. Both of them could slaughter weaker C-grades easily, and even higher-tiered C-grades wanted to avoid them due to their uncertainty in killing a Unique Lifeform. For failure would mean a delayed death just a few years later when the Unique Lifeform caught up, and victory would mean nearly nothing as even if their strength was equal, then killing an opponent in a lower grade wouldn't be rewarded by the system.

What they would instead do was take a side and support the Unique Lifeform for future benefits. That is unless there was more than one. If the supremacy of the Unique Lifeform was challenged. There would

be sown doubt if supporting the Unique Lifeform was worth it, and even more so, then this would be a good chance to break off and attempt to do your own thing. To pursue personal goals... to get revenge.

The Fallen King and the Ashen Phantom Devourer had battled for nearly four hours with neither getting any advantage during the first encounter. The mountains were torn asunder, and thousands of unlucky observing beasts died in the process. After the fourth hour, the Ashen Phantom Devourer chose to disengage. A day later, it attacked again, and their fight resumed.

It was like a neverending cycle. The Ashen Phantom Devourer was a being that was near-impossible to kill. Its body was more like a living domain rather than an actual physical entity, making dealing damage incredibly difficult. At the same time, the King of the Forest had a powerful, constantly active barrier, and even if one managed to break it, all one found was a bark-like armor that offered incredible resistance to all damage.

This made it all a battle of endurance, and with both of them able to escape easily, no true winner would be found unless one party made a breakthrough or found something to truly exploit. They both knew this, which is also why they wanted to keep fighting. It was rare that a Unique Lifeform could find a being able to stand up to them and even rarer to find another Unique Lifeform. Other Unique Lifeforms were the closest they could ever get to kin, and this sparked an intense innate desire to prove themselves. Prove their Paths and prove that they were superior Unique Lifeforms.

Neither cared that their fight left a power vacuum ripe for exploitation and that those who before found themselves held back now chose to act.

William stared at the ritual circle as he operated it, karmic magic revolving around him. The oversized squirrel sat in its middle for a moment before opening its eyes, anger burning within from what it had just experienced. Not directed at William, but someone it had forgotten and now remembered. It bowed towards him before leaving, going towards the teleportation chamber.

What am I even doing? William asked himself for what felt like the umpteenth time in the last... year? Years? A long time that is for sure.

Shaking his head, he decided not to think about it too much. Whenever he made his own decisions, things just turned to shit anyway, so it was better for him to just do as was told by someone wiser: his master.

The ritual circle he was operating on was one he had been working on for a good while. It had been the final requirement for his Profession Evolution Quest, and taken all of his skills to pull off. Of course, it wasn't the only thing he could have made; all it required was for him to make something related to his profession at a sufficiently high level.

His Class Evolution Quest had also been easy. But his Race Evolution Quest was just... he didn't get it.

#### Race Evolution Quest

As you reach the end of D-grade, you have walked a Path seeking perfection. A Path of discovery of yourself and what you want to be. Yet you have not found it. Without determination and vision, there is no Path. Without desire, there is no progress. Without willingness, there is no life.

Objective: Find your Path (0/1)

William had found his Path already, so he didn't get why the fuck he hadn't completed the quest already. If he had completed it, he would be C-grade and one step closer to being useful to his master. But no matter how much he tried to figure it out, the quest remained uncompleted. It made absolutely no sense to him, and he had asked his master, but his master just said that he had taught William

enough to figure it out on his own. This only frustrated him more as he felt like he was disappointing his master.

Just focus on your work, and you can figure it out later, he told himself as he prepared for the next somewhat confused beasts to enter the ritual circle. William worked his magic as he pulled on the karmic strings and increased their strength. He gathered them almost into a ball which he used to weave a tapestry and allowed the beast to see. And see, it did.

Its eyes filled with animosity, and it even threw William an angry glance. Not that he could blame it. He had allowed it to experience something that most would perhaps want to live without, but these beasts had all requested it. Not knowing had simply been more painful than now finding out.

As for what he made them experience? Memories. Memories of their lives before the system arrived.

To say that humans had treated animals shitty before the system was an understatement. William knew that he was the furthest from a saint back then, but the crimes he had committed were nothing compared to some others. Individual researchers had killed thousands of mice, and just how many fish were caught every day? How many deer were shot and killed? How many animals hunted or farmed simply for their hides or horns?

The answer was a fucking lot. Humans had been fine treating animals like shit. What would happen if you decided to kill a mouse that snuck into your home? Nothing. What would happen if you decided to use your BB gun to shoot down two squirrels? Nothing. There were no laws against it, and if there were, the worst that happened was a fine.

At least there was no true punishment before.

Now you had a small baby squirrel that remembered seeing its parents killed by teenagers. A baby squirrel that had grown to late D-grade. William's job was only to make them remember their entire lives and then give them an outlet and a new goal. He would find anyone related to the beasts using the karmic connections. Anyone who had hurt them or those who injured them before the system. The C-grade jellyfish would then teleport them to the vicinity of this area for them to carry out their revenge on humanity.

But... there were still questions that haunted him. He knew what he was doing. He knew what the purpose of what he was doing was. He knew the goals of Ell'Hakan and his master's expectations. He knew what the beasts were planning and about so many things.

Yet he still didn't know...

Why am I even doing this? Why am I helping some alien? Why is all I am doing still not enough? Why am I still afraid and still have nightmares?

And was another thing that bothered him a lot. One that had annoyed him ever since the time he went to see the Augur of Hope. A man he had killed. The Augur had greeted him without a care for their history and had shown only pity. He had then helped William find some people, but the last words he spoke as they parted still rang in his mind.

"I hope you find your Path once more. You were climbing a mountain back then, but all I see before you now is a bridge with the ropes cut."

William hated that the Augur had to speak without actually saying anything. The last time they met, he had said that William already had a Path and now he suddenly didn't, despite finally finding meaning

with his master. Then again, the Augur was still some D-grade; what the hell did he know compared to a Primordial?

No, he just had to work on the tasks given by his master, and he was sure he would find his Path. He had wanted to visit this former girlfriend of the Malefic's Chosen but simply did not have time due to the many tasks he was given. Not that it was a high priority.

According to Ell'Hakan, their recent encounter should put the Malefic Viper's Chosen out of commission for at least three and a half months, with the expected time being over half a year. William did not fault the alien for not fighting the Malefic One's Chosen outright. He was a damn monster. But he did think it a bit stupid to just piss him off like that. In fact, he was pretty damn certain Ell'Hakan's plans would fail miserably as if there was one thing William was sure about, it was that when it came to that monster nothing ever went as expected.

Not that it was truly any of his concern. William just did as he was told.

Jake considered for a moment where he was.

He was trapped in a different space... one where One Step would not simply allow him to step out. One would have to do something special to get out – or just go crazy with destructive energies in Jake's case – but if not, he was trapped.

Jake grinned and summoned his wings. Time to upgrade these bad boys and escape Sandy's stomach!

He didn't know if it was just dumb luck, but this was a perfect opportunity for him to practice. He informed Sandy of what he wanted to do, and Sandy responded by playing along. Jake felt the walls harden and the space stabilize even more than before.

Jake instantly knew escape just got a lot harder. If it was just space magic, Jake could maybe find a way with One Step, but it wasn't just space magic. There were other concepts mixed in too. If there wasn't, Sandy would be a Genesis Space Worm and not a Genesis Cosmic Worm, after all.

He could still probably overload Sandy with destructive mana or go ham with poisons or something, but even then, he wasn't sure how much damage that would even do to the worm. Sandy had honestly become a bit of a monster. The sheer level of power this stomach skill required was immense, and he reckoned nearly no D-grade would be able to escape on their own.

All he could say was that he was glad Sandy was on his side. Because damn, would it be annoying to have a worm kidnap friends and family and fly away if you pissed it off. Which reminded him not to annoy Sandy too much.

Dispelling his wayward thoughts, Jake refocused his mind on the task at hand. Wings of the Malefic Viper upgrade. He knew that he had to take it in a quite different direction than it currently was. There was not a hint of space affinity or anything like that in the wings currently, and if he was being totally honest, he wasn't even sure the upgraded version was all about space magic either. Likely there was some space magic involved, but as with many things, it was just never that simple.

Jake once more tried to correctly remember how he felt during the vision where he experienced the skill. He had definitely felt the wings be filled with energy. Way more than usual. Back then, the Viper had summoned them as phantasmal wings just to use the skill too.



As he remembered more and more, one detail stood out. The Viper had changed color to green during the process, and at first, Jake had just thought that an effect of the then-S-grade's immense mana. But the Viper was far too good at energy control for that. So why had his body turned green? Jake also vividly remembered the Viper shooting into the distance, meaning it was not teleportation but more just insanely fast movement - movement that made space part... not helped by space as one would expect from a skill using the space affinity. Perhaps it was more related to Shadow Vault? No, that didn't seem like it either, especially after sim-Jake said he was of no help.

He felt a bit stuck. It was clear he was missing something crucial, and he was a bit mad at himself for not focusing on the skill more during the vision back then. Okay, then again, Fang of Man and Fangs of the Malefic Viper upgrading from one vision was great, and he couldn't fault himself too much, but still.

Jake began trying many different things as time passed. About a day went by before Sandy found a big C-grade sand lizard guarding some kind of natural formation of crystals or something. Jake had no idea what it was, but Sandy got excited and practically spat him out like he was a damn pocket monster to fight for his worm master.

Anyway.

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 179 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 181 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

A good bit of exercise later, and Jake was back in the stomach, where he began testing again. He tried to infuse different concepts and see if that felt right, but nothing did. The entire idea of infusing something entirely new into the wings also felt wrong. Every other upgrade had built upon what was already there. Expanded it. If it added something new, Jake could at least see it be linked with everything else in the skill. None of his current ideas were linked to any of the core functions of Wings.

As time passed and he practiced, he kept coming back to the issue of nothing he tried building upon what was already there. He tried to see if there was some hidden feature he had not discovered, some mighty flapping technique he had missed, but there was nothing. All infusing mana did was create more poison. As Jake thought this, he had a eureka moment.

He considered if the Viper hadn't actually used any of what Jake expected... what if he had done the exact opposite? Used only what the wings already had, but in an entirely different way. In a far more extreme way.

What if he had simply pumped out a poison removing everything between him and his destination, corroding a hole through reality itself?

#### Chapter 530 - A Logical Conclusion

It was an absolutely crazy thought. Poisoning space itself... no, poisoning reality. To target every single facet of reality and effectively create a vacuum of concepts between you and your destination.

That is also why the mist was used. The mist was from Blood of the Malefic Viper and thus contained Records of all poisons Jake had ever interacted with. With the Trial of Myriad Poisons, Jake had interacted with countless, and it wasn't like he had slowed down much after that either, still eating everything slightly toxic in his path.

Jake began his science and tried to work on how one would supercharge the wings the way the Viper had done, but also found it a problem to control the mist and form a tunnel between himself and where he wanted to escape to. Did he need to make a cylinder of poison or something that isolated everything around it? No, that would take way too much power...

What about shooting a canon of poison in the direction and then diving after that? It could work, but space tended to reform too quickly, and if his opponent was actively trying to stop him, he would need an insane amount of poison mist to do that. The mist also kind of sucked, to begin with.

He then returned to the very important detail of the Viper turning green. Why had he done that? Some shield to protect himself from the poison?

A few theories popped up immediately, but none fit. Jake was deep in thought and tried a few things as his wings pulsed with power, sending mist out. Ultimately, he decided that he first needed to make some kind of poison able to corrode through reality. Saying it so casually was damn weird, but he was serious.

Passive mana tended to not be that strong as long as you targeted the right things. This was why Alchemical Flame was so damn good at breaking down objects, as it directly targeted the passive mana and the concepts keeping things whole.

So, Jake needed a poison that targeted passive mana that didn't fight back. Maybe he could apply concepts from Alchemical Flame directly there.... yeah, that actually seemed doable. There were many plants and poisons potent at naturally corroding things. Acids found that went through stone that a C-grade could not even scratch like it was nothing, poison mist that would turn a block of metal an S-grade would dream of crafting a weapon from into swiss cheese. These existed everywhere, and Jake had consumed plenty.

But even if he made this, what about non-passive mana? Like where he was trapped right now? That kind of mana would fight him actively. Could he even make something that eroded the wall of Sandy's stomach? He knew he probably could with Touch, but as mist?

Jake groaned in annoyance as he felt himself be mentally pinged by Sandy. He obliged and found himself outside once more, instantly noticing that the area had changed to rocky terrain and before him was a large C-grade bird of some kind.

“Go human! Use bow attack!” Sandy said with excitement as Jake pulled out his bow and added another C-grade to his list of slain foes before getting back in his pokeba- stomach.

He did have to admit that Sandy was damn good at analyzing his strength and picking opponents.

Back in the chamber, Jake felt more relaxed after a bit of killing, seeing the entire thing with new eyes. It was like having a good night’s sleep and then waking up to look at your project again. Jake considered different poisons he would need in the mist, and it quickly became clear he would need damn many concepts at once. No, he could not have all be active at once; he needed to make an adaptable mist that targeted everything at once but only actively targeted what it encountered.

And then he came back to that damn green color. Why the hell was the Viper glowing? Was it because... no... it made sense?

Jake had been looking at it all wrong. The Malefic Viper had not made a path of escape using the mist. He had not made a poison mist that eroded everything - he became the poison mist. Rather than dripping acid on the evil to get through, the Viper became a semi-solid ball of acid that was dropped onto it. So even if the metal above reformed, he would still get through.

The Viper had wrapped himself in it. Like a cocoon, the poison mist wrapped around him in a supercharged state. That was why the Viper was glowing green; his entire body had turned into toxic mist, and he used his power to keep it strong.

As Jake realized this, he felt like something clicked in his mind. He instantly checked Path of the Heretic-Chosen and saw that his intuition had been correct.

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

Did Jake think he could upgrade the skill without experiencing another vision? Sure. Probably. But Jake also kind of feared that he would lose the skill with his C-grade upgrade or maybe lose the uses. So he wanted to use all of them, even if it was a bit of a waste.

Ah, who was he kidding? He just wanted to see Villy get embarrassed, have his ass handed to him, and be forced to escape.

Even with everything happening on Earth, the inside of the workshop appeared entirely undisturbed. Arnold was still working on his latest creation as he got an expected visit from a recent arrival to their planet.

Ell'Hakan had to admit that he found the entire construction quite novel. A massive metal dome with impressive enchantments all over. The material itself also looked incredibly tough, and he doubted that anything mundane could break through. It was truly a defensive stronghold, and even he would have issues breaking into it within any reasonable timeframe.

Luckily, he did not have to break in.

As he approached, the dome simply opened up to him as he met the assistant to the machinist, as the human named Arnold had been dubbed.

“Welcome, sir; how may I assist you?” the assistant asked. She was obviously aware of what was going on and knew that trying to keep Ell’Hakan out would only delay the inevitable. Besides, it was simply smarter to allow him access.

“Impressive construction, and even more impressive techniques present on the inside. I thank you for allowing me in without any needless delays. Do tell, is the machinist available?” Ell’Hakan asked.

“I will inform him of your presence,” the assistant said with a bow and a smile as she briefly left the welcome room. Ell’Hakan felt the doubt and hesitation in her but also some relief. A good emotion to amplify as it could lead to other positive thoughts and feelings. Having the assistant possess a good view of him wasn’t necessary, but a nice to have. No, the one he truly cared about was Arnold.

Ell’Hakan had done his research and found this man far more outstanding than anyone seemed to give him credit for. He was blessed by Void God Oras, something that even his Patron found utterly baffling as no D-grade human should be able to handle that. The ones a Void God usually blessed were either incredibly powerful members of the enlightened races and at far higher grades, or they were creatures explicitly suited to them, such as rare elementals or other monsters.

The reason why he approached this machinist was obviously for his mind. Because one other thing he discovered was that the man had no true loyalty to the Malefic’s Chosen. He simply worked for him and did some commissions. There appeared to be no true relationship there; it was purely transactional. The fact that he had stayed even after the City Lord left was further proof that Arnold simply did not view himself as part of the Malefic Chosen’s faction. So if he was offered good enough terms and his emotions swayed properly, there was no reason for him not to switch.

“Sir, he is ready to receive you,” the assistant came in and said with another bow less than a minute after leaving.

Ell’Hakan thanked her as he entered the workshop. He had prepared for a trap just in case but found nothing even as he scanned his surroundings. The moment he was in the workshop, he found himself overwhelmed by the sheer number of projects going on. It was astonishing one man could do so much at once, and the complexity of every project was incredible.

The planet Ell’Hakan came from was not a very technologically advanced one. He had learned that quickly after the integration. So this all served to overwhelm him more but also strengthened his desire to recruit the man. The Celestial Kingdom lacked people like him as no natives were technologically minded, and Ell’Hakan had a feeling this man alone could lead to a technological revolution.

“It is truly my pleasure to finally meet you,” Ell’Hakan said as he saw the machinist. He did not look like much, but as mentioned, then it was not his body but his mind that was worthy of respect.

“What do you want?” the man asked curtly. If not for his Bloodline, he would have thought the man was hostile, but no. There were no such emotions. In fact, the emotional spectrum he felt from the man was incredibly narrow and muted.

But it was there. Ell’Hakan had a faint fear that the man somehow didn’t possess emotions at all, as that would partly explain his ability to have a Void God as his Patron. It turned out that even if he was peculiar, then he was still a human with emotions to bite onto and manipulate. To Ell’Hakan, the slightest thing was enough.

“I am incredibly impressed by your work, and I come with an offer,” Ell’Hakan said, knowing not to mince words with the man to avoid testing his patience. “I am aware your ties to Haven are shallow at best, and you are primarily here due to the resources offered, yes?”

He did not even need the machinist to answer to know it was true. His emotions gave it away.

“If that is the case, I can offer you something better. The backing of not just a single city but an entire world. A planet full of natural resources for you to explore and exploit to your liking, with near-endless funds. And all I ask in return is a bit of conditional loyalty,” he offered with a smile.

That is when he felt just the emotion he wanted. Desire. Greed. This man was stoic, but alas, still human and would fall to human desires like any other. But there was also a lot of distrust. Arnold seemed to be in thought as Ell’Hakan tried to soothe his worries.

“To show my sincerity, we can start with a temporary working contract. Simply let me hire you for a while. Come and see my planet once I return, and if you refuse to work for me anymore, I swear I will help you gain passage to anywhere else,” Ell’Hakan said convincingly. He also took out a small star-shaped token and handed it to the machinist.

“At the very least consider the offer.”

Arnold looked at the token and took it. A faint sliver of trust had wormed in. It was weak and only trusted that Ell’Hakan would give him time to think and was not there to cause him harm, but that alone was a springboard. He amplified Arnold’s emotions and used his Bloodline liberally to the level of getting a slight headache. The machinist was a tough one compared to the Malefic’s Chosen. If Arnold was a faint candle of emotions, then the Malefic’s Chosen was a roaring inferno.

“I will,” Arnold finally answered with a genuine nod.



“To further show my sincerity,” Ell’Hakan said as he summoned a number of metals from his planet that none of his current crafters could work with. Instantly he felt the man’s interest, and Ell’Hakan could not help himself but smile as he subtly left.

He had a good feeling Arnold would make the right choice.

Arnold sat alone after the alien left. He felt a strong sense of trust in the man but paid it little attention. Checking the recording of the conversation, he did not necessarily find anything amiss either. Arnold considered the offer and checked some provided information in the token. It even included a potential draft of an offer as well as a method to contact Ell’Hakan.

The offer was good. Brilliant, even. Far more than Lord Thayne and Haven had or likely would ever offer him. Their resources were limited, and it had primarily been the merchant Sultan helping him out by selling Arnold’s products and buying raw materials. To say he was supported by Haven and Lord Thayne would be simply incorrect. At least not in an institutional capacity. Lord Thayne had personally helped him, but that had been transactional in nature.

If Arnold went by his guts, the answer was a no-brainer. He had far more trust in Ell’Hakan supporting him than Lord Thayne losing interest and just leaving for good. Arnold would definitely accept the offer if he had to choose.

But he didn’t choose. Because truly, what he felt didn’t matter and should never be a factor in his decision-making. Arnold started out with the most obvious and made a detailed analysis of his own thought patterns, identifying that his emotional responses had been adversely affected, further cementing that he should not use his flawed mind to decide.

Additionally, he analyzed the offer, truly finding it worth it even from a far more objective standpoint. The benefits would be more than Haven would offer, but that was only in the short term. Using his current working model for predicting behavior and going by all the information he had, there were few positive outcomes.

El'Hakan had made the Malefic's Chosen an enemy, and it did not take an Eye of Oras to see all the potential risks involved in that. Lord Thayne was simply too unpredictable in every aspect for Arnold to make any conclusions or properly assess him. He did not make the decisions Arnold would expect in nearly any situation. He was an utterly illogical human. And if there was one thing Arnold wanted to avoid in his calculations, it was high-variable outliers ruining the entire model.

Looking over the data one final time, Arnold simply nodded and returned to his work. The decision he came to was simple.

Just don't choose a side.

Lord Thayne would not ask for him to choose one, and El'Hakan had a standing offer, so why decide now? The only reason he would be forced to make a decision was if either party lost. In which case, he would choose the person not losing.

With Lord Thayne, however, the only valid parameter to rule him the loser would be his death, while for El'Hakan, it would also include him fleeing the planet. The reason for this difference?

All data indicated he could survive an angry El'Hakan coming after him.

All data indicated he couldn't survive an angry Jake Thayne hunting him to the ends of eternity.

