

Hunter 551

Chapter 551 - Broken Sky

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

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

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

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

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

His prediction of twelve hours turned out to be slightly off as only nine and a half hours later, he felt the other Unique Lifeform approach. The Fallen King could only hope that the little hunter was ready

despite the pushed-up timescale, and if not, the King would simply have to hold on a bit longer than expected.

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

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

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

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

Staying defensive was difficult even if the King knew he was just buying time, and he did launch the occasional attack to not be too suspicious. Luckily, the other Unique Lifeform could easily misunderstand his carefulness as doubt and weakness, making it appear less out-of-place than it actually was.

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

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

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

An annoying but highly effective attack.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shade of the hunter's arcane affinity.

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

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

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

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

The Malefic's Chosen.

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

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

Who!? Wait...

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

"What are you doing he-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Approximately nine hours earlier.

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

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

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

[Quiver of Perrinality (Legendary)] – A quiver created from the leather of a powerful B-grade beast with the ability to create minor subdimensions within its skin where it stores different natural treasures to use as weapons. Made into a quiver, it now retains those same effects. Allows the wearer to infuse mana into the quiver to conjure arrows. Allows the wearer to store conjured creations classified as arrows within the quiver without experiencing any energy decay for an extended period of time. The inside of the quiver is spatially expanded, allowing the wearer to store arrows of varying sizes. The wearer will have innate control of the inside of the quiver when bound. Enchantments: Perrinial Quiver. Requirements: lvl 135+ in any humanoid race.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Go.

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

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

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

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

“Splitting Arrow Rain.”

Chapter 552 - Unique Trump Cards

One became ten.

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

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

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

And then everything exploded.

From up in the air, Jake saw the entire world flash purple. Even with his high Perception, it took him a second to see again, and what was revealed could only be described as a cataclysm. What had once been a mountain range was now still kind of a mountain range, but with a massive crater in the middle.

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

All the ash had been destroyed, but the domain remained. The King had managed to shield himself as he was not the primary target and did not hesitate to engage as the domain stirred. Ash began appearing as a figure assembled itself.

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

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

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

Oh no, you don't!

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I see.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shattered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is it dead?" Jake asked as he landed.

"You unleash an attack capable of destroying an entire region upon a creature that is effectively a living domain, further adding a massive toxic payload to the mayhem you created, and you question its efficiency?" the King scoffed. "The Devourer is dead. The soul was weakened and capable of destruction, so I capitalized on the weakness and went in for the kill."

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

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

"That was the plan," Jake said with a nod.

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

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

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

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

The one winning would have to be the Ashen Phantom Devourer, though. With both the Fallen King and the Malefic's Chosen there, the Unique Lifeform should be pressured, giving Ell'Hakan quite an

opportunity if he said so himself. Keeping a Unique Lifeform loyal was difficult, but if he could get it to feel a sense of debt towards him, that would be more than welcome and extremely exploitable.

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

The house he had constructed was not just for him to reside in while waiting for the Malefic's Chosen but also created to serve as a small hub for teleportation. Taking out a token, he called for one of the two people stationed in Haven to come over and operate the teleportation circle for him to use. The distance required for the teleportation made it a necessity to have someone on this side.

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

A painting?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ell'Hakan estimated the human must have spent the last few months recuperating. After the fight during the Treasure Hunt event Earth had undergone, the Sword Saint, as people called him, had been cooped up and injured for several months. The only thing capable of leaving such harm was severe overuse of a boosting skill or soul damage. He guessed it was the overuse of a boosting skill, and it looked like he had

to use that boosting skill once more to handle the two servants. If not, why would he not have handled internal matters of his clan?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 553 - Sun & Rain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Celestial Alignment of Yore."

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

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

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

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

"No, it was not," Miyamoto spoke.

"Then was it--"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sunrise."

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

"Rainblade."

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

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

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

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

"Ten Thousand Droplets."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Sword Saint just smirked a bit to himself as he sheathed his blade. "What do you have to gain by invading the planet of another Chosen? Much less one who has nothing to do with you. You are the only

one who chose to make an enemy, not him. In my eyes, the questionable decisions in this entire conflict are one-sided. There is an aggressor and a defender, with the natural inclination of man being to side with the defender.”

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

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

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

El'Hakan raised his trident towards the sky. A beam of light descended upon him as Miyamoto saw the air shimmer. His water droplets began to evaporate, and his skin burned as the temperature rose even more than before. Up in the sky, the sun now hung right above his head.

“Scorching Noon.”

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

Fighting a foe in their territory is always more complicated.

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

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

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

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

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

"Ember Chains."

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

“Sunwrath.”

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

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

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

“Time magic,” Ell’Hakan recognized out loud. “Who the hell are you really?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The old man would oblige.

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

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

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

"Sunfall."

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

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

"Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut."

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

Chapter 554 - Miscalculations & A Third Meeting

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

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

“A Transcendent...”

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

Miyamoto had hoped to do more.

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

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

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

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

Miyamoto did not disagree. "You, too, asked for my assessment. While you are powerful, you seem to walk different Paths. Writing a story and trying to form a legend is not something one can force but something that is born from truly monumental events. You can try but never guarantee success. No strategy or plan will ever work perfectly... but I have a feeling you already knew this."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wait, where is the loot?” Jake asked the King.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Human – lvl 199]

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

Hence Jake opened with the most relevant question.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I..." William stammered, making Jake shake his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sorry,” the young man repeated, still staring at the ground.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

William hesitated but finally answered. "I... am stuck."

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

"Evolution quest," William muttered. "Can't find my Path."

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck no.

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

Chapter 555 - 0/10 Master, Would Not Recommend

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

William had also helped Ell'Hakan by proxy as he helped awaken memories in beasts. Why he had done this, the young man admitted he didn't know. He said as much quite clearly, yet one thing lacked. There was no real questioning anymore, just an admittance he didn't know.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bull-fucking-shit," Jake scoffed. "Who the hell can't evolve to C-grade with the kind of start you got, being blessed by a Primordial and all that? Shit, even without the events, you should have been able to. Think for just a single second here. If your dear Master guided you so thoroughly, then why are you still stuck? Why is the Path he has shown you not one that works? I would begin to question my GPS if it made me drive into a wall."

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

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

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

"Master said I would need it..." William muttered.

Jake just sighed again.

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

"That..." William hesitated. "Master never mentioned that, I-"

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

William kept quiet as Jake kept going.

"Also, you talk about nightmares. Pretty funny now that I think about it. I have only had one real nightmare since the system arrived, and you know why that was? Because Eversmile was the one who caused it to mess with me. And now you say you are suffering from nightmares? What a coincidence, eh?" Jake said, shaking his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The King had spoken to both William and Jake despite clearly not caring much about the young metal mage. Jake did not want to explain either but just gave the cliff notes. "Killed by me, resurrected by a

Primordial who loves karmic magic, and now it looks like the disciple of the karmic fucker has become the one being fucked with.”

“Explains some things,” the King merely said.

“Like what?” Jake asked curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I... Master isn't answering... but... this doesn't make any fucking sense!" William finally exploded and looked up. "No fucking sense! Master has helped me so much, spent ages teaching me karmic magic, guided me, given me tips and advice, and you say that was all to fuck with me!?"

"Sounds like it," Jake shrugged.

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

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

"Bloodline?" Jake asked, confused.

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

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

"Evidence of what!?"

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

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

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

“...no?” William asked.

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

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

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

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

"A lie it is. Bloodlines do not truly have rarities," the King answered before Jake could. "They are classified as Bloodline Abilities and not skills, to begin with, even having their own spot in the status screen, making them not part of your race, class, or profession. The only rarity a Bloodline can have is Unique, and that only appears if you are the only being in existence with your specific Bloodline."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 556 - End Of Conflict: The Start Of Another

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

it is acceptable, it becomes acceptable. Those who did kill people for what others would view as trivial reasons were very much ostracized as they posed a danger to the stability of the flock,” Jake explained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Returning to the topic at hand, Jake regarded William.

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

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

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

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

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

Alright, that logic was a bit flawed, but Jake didn't bother trying to come up with something better. Why would he? His stakes in William "getting better" were low as hell. He still wasn't even sure why he was helping the kid. I blame that damn psychologist... or was she a psychiatrist?

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

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

"How do you even know tha-"

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

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

...

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A giant space worm.

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

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

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

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

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

That day, it became clear to everyone.

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

Chapter 557 - Towards Haven We Go

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

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

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

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

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

No actual details about Sandy had been shared for several reasons. The primary of which being that Jake just didn't like sharing information about others without permission. Telling everyone who Sandy was and Sandy's abilities just didn't sit right with him, so he kept things simple.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes!" Jake confirmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You stole something from them?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, Jake... this was just the first arc of your story. I am sure there is far more to come, and the fact that Yip has not made any moves himself either is proof of this. Better be prepared to keep dealing with him and others who may want to make trouble for you in the future," Villy said a bit teasingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This allowed Miranda to go to her old office without having to deal with many other things. When she entered the building, all of the former attendants looked at her with relief, the city having been rather tumultuous for the last few hours with an old man cleaning house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miranda just shook her head as he headed off. He had changed quite a bit after the Myriad Paths event, but he still had the qualifications of a leader. One of the reasons he had been put in charge was because of the peacekeepers of Haven. They were effectively the police force, and most of them were old

soldiers from the Fort. Considering the peacekeepers were already respected, she could see how the United Cities Alliance had issues taking control. Though they had made quite some progress.

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

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

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

That, and the future of their planet.

Chapter 558 - Bold Plans

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Title?" Jake asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sim-Jake grinned. "Sharing control."

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

Sim-Jake sat down and continued.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lord Thayne, it has-"

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

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

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

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

That is when Jake noticed a faint shimmer around the pile of bananas, and he also remembered that they tended to go bad extremely fast after being taken away from the not-a-tree. It appeared like he had made a small barrier of time magic or something to stabilize it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake nodded seriously.

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

Chapter 559 - World-Tier Preparation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake had the ability to tell everyone to fuck off.

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

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

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

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

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

"My entire Path so far, ever since exiting the Tutorial, has revolved around you, Jake. I manage the city for you. I got my Blessing because of you. It would not be an understatement to say that everything I am

is due to your existence. If I became World Leader, that would be separate from you, and I am not even sure how well that would work for me. I do not doubt that being World Leader will offer a potential C-grade evolution option, one that would likely be unwise to skip over, and I would not pick that as it would negatively impact me. However, if you become World Leader, we will build upon what we already have, just scaled up from a city to a planet,” Miranda explained, the King and Sword Saint both agreeing.

Jake had also been curious how him becoming World Leader would work for the King, but that wasn’t a problem either. In all honesty, then the system had probably expected people to become World Leaders who had no interest in actually leading their world. Jake wasn’t even sure Ell’Hakan had the profession of a World Leader based on all he had shown. Maybe some off-shoot or variant, but it being the vanilla version seemed unlikely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Starseizing Titan, a fellow Primordial.

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

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

It was well-known that one should never disturb the Starseizing Titan, yet these factions had gods stationed in this galaxy with hopes of having the Starseizing Titan assist them. It was a bit how Villy used to be hounded by people wanting him to do alchemy for them before he just started killing them for not going through the proper channels.

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

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

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

He was his divine realm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He has improved, Vilastromoz recognized. What the Starseizing Titan did was not space magic... no, the spacial reaction was simply from him shrinking his form. What the Titan did was far more than that. He condensed his body into a smaller form... losing nothing in the process.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A true weapon surpassing even the Divine rarity.

Chapter 560 - Towards A Better Future

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Arthur has also shown himself to not be an idiot, and he knows that will not be in the best interest of the citizens of Earth. Giving him a seat at the council will also send a clear message that we are not taking over the planet as the Order of the Malefic Viper but as earthlings. It will also communicate that you are not the type of person to just go and kill anyone who disagrees with you or puts himself in contrarian positions to you. While some may interpret it as a weakness to "forgive" him, it can also be

seen as a strength as you, a Chosen, never truly cared for his petty games. That you don't care enough about him to personally act. In some ways, I also think the best punishment will be to have him fix what mistakes he had made while we make full use of his expertise. Moreover, I think much of his hatred stems from ignorance. He views us as representations of concepts, not as humans, just like him. I believe with time, we can find common ground, and he can become an asset," Miranda further added.

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

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

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

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

He understood why they needed someone from the United Cities Alliance and also kind of understood why it had to be Arthur. As Miranda had explained it, then the man was now stuck between a rock and a hard place. If he kept fighting, the result was already written on the wall, and soon enough, he would

find himself slain. Even if he became World Leader, it would be short-lived... and chances are he wouldn't, because even if Jake wouldn't be able to kill Arthur, then he sure as hell could go on a rampage of the ages.

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

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

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

One had to remember that Jake's gut was not about making decisions that were good for anyone but himself. The reason he wanted to kill Arthur was just to make himself feel better, the future be damned.

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

What would mom and dad think?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mass exodus.

"From the reports of the Court that your brother so kindly sent over, the Holy Church has made a new vast teleportation network to bring all the faithful back to Sanctdomo. Meanwhile, those who were not an actual part of the faction but just living there were given the harsh choice of joining or getting thrown out the gates. They seemed to have read the writing on the wall that they would not win no matter what. If you won, they would lose, and if El'Hakan won, the United Cities Alliance would have also

moved to get them out. Their final plan seemed to be to, at the very least, make sure the Risen would not be able to get anything from Earth either,” Miranda sighed.

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

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

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

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

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

Jake looked at Miranda. “Don’t look at me like I don’t have a mountain of work in front of me with a damn mountain range in the distance of even more damn work. In a month, we will literally take over

the planet, and I still have the aftermath of your war with another Chosen to figure out. Oh, and then we expect Arthur to come... yeah, do I need to say more?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wouldn't that be a far greater story?