

Hunter 971

Chapter 971: The Cost of Saving A Friend

The Viper said there would be pain... and that had definitely been an understatement.

Jake was usually very good at dealing with pain. Most C-grades would find themselves unaffected by pain when wounded and just soldier through. To Jake, pain was just another point of feedback informing him what his next action should be, not much different from all his other senses.

However, what Jake felt when the Viper got to work was different. It was unlike any kind of pain Jake had ever felt before, counting both bodily harm and soul damage. This type of pain wasn't just informing him of damage taken but of something far more... existential.

Like what was causing his pain could truly erase him entirely in both body and soul.

The Viper had barely gotten started as his body erupted with power, putting pressure on Jake's very being.

"Small note: don't try to fight back; it will only make my job harder and the end result worse and far more painful. Be advised some things might break during this process," the Viper spoke, seemingly not even purposefully infusing his voice with energy.

Jake did as he said, despite every fiber of his being screaming at him to escape the situation. But there was no escape, as he could only grit his teeth. What he felt besides the pain, Jake couldn't comprehend at all either.

Villy lifted a hand, and all Jake saw was a dark green color that made no sense to him. Instinctively, he knew this was made of pure Records, and as the Viper looked at it, he sighed. "You really did a number on yourself."

Parts of the Malefic Viper's form began turning into wisps of light that merged with the summoned mass of Records, as something was clearly happening. Jake felt everything so vividly mixing with the pain that muddled his mind, yet he couldn't help but try and understand, and he knew the Viper was making it this visual for his sake.

Time slowly passed, as the Viper's body kept disappearing, his entire lower half soon done, leaving only his upper body above his stomach, with one side also entirely faded, leaving mostly a head, a shoulder, and a single arm.

"Fuck me, this is even worse than it looks," the Viper muttered. "And get those thoughts out of your head, I'm also learning here. This is uncharted territory, but unlike you, I have the actual ability, skill, and knowledge to back up my actions."

Jake wasn't saying anything as the Viper lifted his one remaining arm toward the sky of Jake's Soulshape.

"You better be grateful, for no other god would go this far for their Chosen," the Malefic Viper said, looking up. His mouth opened, and Jake only had time to hear a single word. "Malefic-"

WARNING!

[REDACTED]

WARNING!

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

...

Jake blinked, the pain gone. In front of his eyes, an ocean of warnings and redacted messages, and a feeling that only let him know that some time had just passed. Time he had no memory of. Staring, he saw the form of the Malefic Viper standing there, nearly fully tangible, as he turned to Jake.

"There. Patched you up best anyone in the damn multiverse could. Even went a bit above and beyond and was nice enough to preserve that broken half of a Planetary Core you had in there. Despite sealing the stomach, you should still benefit from that thing, at least, though really fucking slowly. The good news is, you have a potentially infinite amount of time to fully absorb it because you sure as hell can't

take anything in and out with how it is now. As for the rest of the effects of Palate, they should stay the same. Oh, and for the soul damage, that's up to you to deal with; I think I've done enough," the Viper said, his form already beginning to fade away.

Without being told, Jake knew he had done more than he first promised.

"Thank you," Jake muttered. "But... what happened there? What did you do?"

"I told you already, I went above and beyond. Tried to use what you had given me to get the job done, but it wasn't enough, so I needed a little extra. System didn't like that, but oh well, what's done is done," the snake god smiled.

Jake kept feeling the area within his own Soulspace as he just clenched his fists and nodded. "Again... thank you. I would have been royally fucked without your clutch save."

"Ya sure would have. So better pay me back in spades and turn this piece of charity work into a brilliant investment," Villy said jokingly, shaking his head. "I should stop dilly-dallying. Good luck with the system event, and have fun recovering. Oh, and remember to thank the healer who kept you alive during all this. Without him, you would have been fucked even with my assistance."

With those words, the form of the Malefic Viper faded away, leaving Jake alone back in his Soulspace. Above, the sky was still cracked in many places, and the ground had several fissures. The drop of blood left by the Viper remained unaffected by everything that had happened, and despite Jake's fears, Eternal Hunger was also fine and was already waking up after the Viper's departure.

However, right now, Jake couldn't really think about anything but the lingering feeling left behind by the Malefic Viper within his Soulspace. It felt different from anything he had ever felt before from the Viper. More... powerful? Unfathomable? Jake wasn't sure how to classify it, but it certainly felt "more."

That... wasn't that really unsettled Jake, though. It wasn't why Jake hadn't even tried asking more questions but just thanked the Viper. It was something else in the lingering presence. A unique kind of signature Jake recognized from the Sword Saint, and not a single shadow of doubt remained in Jake's mind:

The Viper had used a Transcendent skill.

It explained why Jake couldn't remember what had happened. It explained the warnings from the system. He only now realized that to fix Jake's mistake using powers considered "outside" the system, the Viper needed to do the same.

Gritting his teeth, Jake slammed his fist on the ground of the Soulspace despite the pain it shot through his body.

Fuck.

Jake knew... one didn't just use a Transcendent skill. It came with a cost. It potentially had a permanent cost, and even if it wasn't, it still dealt a lot of harm. For the Viper to use it to save Jake, he would have had to lose something in return, and all because Jake had been a moron who had to be stupidly arrogant one too many times.

One thing was more certain now than ever before... Jake owed Villy even more now than ever before, and the next round of beers was definitely on him.

It seemed to happen in an instant. Eron had continued to battle with the desolation despite the utterly suppressing aura that pressed him down and actively dealt damage to his soul throughout it all. The task had been far from easy, but Eron couldn't take any risks.

Even the biggest fool would realize something had gone catastrophically wrong. The spark that represented the hunter's soul flickered, weakened, and began to look far more unstable as it was replaced and consumed by the green inferno. Then, the green flames had stopped actively devouring Jake's soul, but the damage was already done.

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Eron genuinely wasn't sure Jake would make it until suddenly, the desolation stopped coming. Not long after, the presence also disappeared, and all Eron had to do was heal Jake's body of any residual damage.

However, things weren't fine. Despite the green flames dispersing and stability returning to the spark, it was still damaged. Severely so. From the look on Jake's face when he finally opened his eyes, it was clear he also realized this.

Jake couldn't wallow for too long. He had to keep moving despite feeling pain all over and having a killer headache. Before he even fully opened his eyes and turned his attention to the outside world, he gathered himself a little. He would have to reflect a lot on what had happened, and there were a few things he had to address.

One of which was perhaps the least important... but despite how utterly shitty everything had gone, Jake had still ultimately upgraded his Scales of the Malefic Viper, which had come with a few levels. To see them, he did have to scroll by a bit over a thousand warning messages, though, some of which had been caused by Jake, but the majority due to whatever the Viper had done.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 279 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 280 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 288 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Usually, Jake would have celebrated that he had unlocked another use of Path of the Heretic-Chosen and was ever closer to level 300, where he would have his suspected meeting with the First Sage... but he wasn't exactly in the mood for any kind of celebration.

After taking stock of his body and his thoroughly damaged soul, Jake finally opened his eyes and saw Eron standing there, looking down at him. The man looked haggard in his own right, his clothes mostly destroyed despite being powerful equipment.

"Thanks for the help," Jake said as he gave Eron a nod, genuinely grateful. As Villy had said, without him there, Jake wasn't sure how any of this would have turned out.

"It's my pleasure, genuinely, and I believe this a mutually beneficial situation. Experiencing desolation in C-grade was very valuable, and I made some good progress. One skill upgrade and three levels, in part due to said skill upgrade, which I myself view as quite the gains," the healer said with a satisfied smile.

"Glad at least one of us came out of this better than we went in," Jake said with a small smile, trying to press down the pain. "I will admit, I wasn't even sure you would show. I kind of assumed desolation wouldn't mesh well with your Path and be one of the most dangerous concepts to you."

"Oh, that assessment is entirely accurate," Eron nodded. "Desolation would be unbelievably dangerous to encounter, but not in this passive form. In this form, all you need to beat it is a superior quantity of energy. However, if it's controlled it's a whole other beast, incomparable to the passive influence of desolation. Seeing and experiencing the concept like this is still a valuable experience I wouldn't do without, though. It allows me to consider countermeasures should I reencounter it, even if that encounter is in its controlled form."

Jake nodded in understanding as he knew what Eron meant. One could compare it to fighting against all the water in the ocean. If it was just there, one could easily work on evaporating and get rid of it over time, with the only real threat the water held being its innate concept to crush you should you go too deep. However, if you faced a water mage able to control just a lake of water to actively try and kill you, it would be far more dangerous than even the entire passive ocean.

"Rather than worry about me, you should assess yourself more closely," Eron said in a slightly scolding tone. "Your soul is damaged severely. From my diagnosis, it does not look like your stats are outright affected. However, the resource pools tend to be the first to suffer and weaken... and so are yours."

"I know," Jake sighed. He had already seen it before. The sad state of that part of his status menu, reflecting the damage he had suffering.

Status

Health Points (HP): 141,365/153,099 (206,470)

Mana Points (MP): 3981/198,367 (442,484)

Stamina: 9203/185,041 (222,170)

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Ignoring the fact his resource pools were nearly empty, the maximum pools had been reduced. Stamina and health both only by around 20% or so – with stamina a bit less affected. However, his mana was fucked. His maximum mana pool had been more than cut in half from the soul damage.

While this did look really fucking bad, it was honestly the best outcome from such a bad situation. As Eron put it:

“The damage does seem limited to there. I do not know how familiar you are with this kind of soul damage, but I would compare it to experiencing frostbite. Like the human body, the soul will always seek to protect its life, and the outer extremities will be the first to go, which, in the instance of the soul, are the resource pools. Contrary to the physical body, where often an amputation would be required, the resource pools are also the part of the soul most easily recovered should the soul damage be significant enough to cause any semi-permanent damage,” Eron gladly explained, Jake not interrupting despite already knowing these things from his own prior research.

He did recognize that Eron probably had a good idea of his situation, which also made him ask:

“Will it heal on its own?”

Despite the resource pools being the easiest part to recover didn’t mean recovery was a given. There were many instances where it ended up requiring certain natural treasures or other sources of external support.

Eron took a moment as he looked deeply at Jake, staring at something clearly only he could see before answering. “Yes. The fashion in which your soul was damaged is frighteningly controlled. As if your soul was a sculpture smashed into a million pieces, then put together perfectly once more. Of course, putting the sculpture together does not make it whole. Only time will be the glue that fully fuses everything back together.”

Jake smiled lightly at Eron's answer and explanation. Villy had really been as nice as possible with what he had to do to save Jake, which only made Jake feel even more guilty over what kind of consequences the god was facing over having gone so far.

Vilastromoz sighed as his projection disappeared from within Jake's Soulspace. Still with him back in the Order, the Autarch from the Altmar Empire had a serious look on his face as he looked at the Viper.

"I'm not going to ask you what happened, but it must have been more than just a Chosen doing something questionable if you had to use that."

The Viper gave a tired smile. "Thank you for your understanding... and I hope it's fine if we end our meeting here."

"Naturally," the Autarch nodded as he got up. "If you need any items or any other form of assistance..."

"I will be fine," Vilastromoz waved him off. "Thank you for the concern, though."

"Of course," the elf said as he disappeared, teleporting away. Always the polite sort that one.

Vilastromoz sighed as he also disappeared with his summoned body and entered his divine realm.

The reason why the Autarch had left was simple... he knew the Viper had just used a Transcendent skill and what that meant.

Every Transcendence had a cost when used. If Eversmile used Karmic Annihilation on someone, it would also affect himself, making Eversmile unaware of nothing more than the fact he had used the skill. Not who he had used it on or why, just that it had been used.

Jake's Transcendent human friend would lose levels and had to painstakingly regain those if he used his full Transcendence. Others the Viper knew about required one to offer incredibly powerful items in exchange. Some forcefully would downgrade skills or even make you lose skills entirely. Permanent or temporary loss of stats was also a very common cost.

The point was no one would ever use their Transcendent skills lightly due to the associated cost that went far above just spending some mana or stamina. It was a significant moment when it was used, especially by a Primordial, where any kind of even semi-permanent loss was massive. Even those that weren't as bad as the fully permanent ones would often take innumerable years to make up for and would set you back significantly... especially because there would always be a cost in Records when using one, no matter what.

This was all common knowledge, and the Viper knew that Jake also knew this. Perhaps knowing he had forced the Viper to use his Transcendent skill should help really hammer home the stupidity of his actions and help him in the future.

To clarify, Vilastromoz did have to use it and hadn't just done it to show off or teach Jake a lesson. He really didn't have any other choice unless he wanted to leave Jake in a really shitty state.

The Transcendent skill the Malefic Viper had used naturally also had a cost. A truly horrific one... at least, that's what most would believe.

"Man, I do feel bad about lying to an old pal like that, but oh well, gotta keep up appearances," the Viper smiled, chuckling within his divine realm. It wasn't like he was going to spill the beans now, as that would likely lead to some annoying people hassling him.

Because the Viper had a little secret. One he had never shared with a single soul in the entire multiverse. Not his wife, not Jake, not any Primordial, and he never intended to share it either. Some secrets were simply meant to be kept under wraps for eternity.

It was true that his Transcendent skill had a very steep and grueling cost that was often seen as one of the very worst consequences possible. Whenever he used the skill, he would lose memories, and memories tended to be the most heavily associated with Records, making it a significant permanent loss that couldn't simply be made up for.

Except... the Viper couldn't lose memories. He had the Bloodline of the Immortal Mind. He was unable to forget.

Yet his Transcendence made him pay in memories... which he couldn't.

The end result?

A completely consequence-free Transcendent skill. All by design, as the Viper had made his Transcendent skill first and done all he could to assure this would be the cost, all with the aim of later obtaining the Bloodline of the First Sage.

There was a reason the Viper was known as a good schemer, and quite a few had even called him a scam artist throughout the ages... a badge he gladly wore with honor. For, truly, what greater honor was there for a scammer but to scam the very universe and system itself?

Chapter 972: Doctor's Orders

Jake stumbled back to his lodge in Haven alongside Eron, who decided to go with him as they kept talking. The healer was also doing what he could to speed up Jake's recovery time, though he could only do so much.

While Jake's resource pools turning to shit was definitely his biggest immediate problem, that didn't mean it was the only one he was actively dealing with. Jake felt like he had just overused his boosting skill way above any extremes prior, as he had severely strained himself. Eron informed Jake that having his body repeatedly emptied of energy and then healed again hadn't exactly been healthy either.

On the way back, Jake had explained some basic things to Eron about what had happened. Mainly because the guy had already figured out most things himself, including even guessing Jake had failed to upgrade a skill using the same kind of unique energy he used to help create Vesperia. Sometimes, Jake forgot the healer could be wicked smart.

There were still a lot of things he naturally didn't know, and he hadn't detected the use of Villy's Transcendence either, something Jake, of course, didn't share. He did seem to have an almost morbid curiosity examining Jake's body, though. Which, according to him, was because seeing this kind of soul damage was a rare encounter, especially when it was the soul of someone as powerful for their level as Jake. Eron also told Jake that despite his soul clearly being weakened, it still burned brighter than the vast majority of people his level, so that was a kind of nice compliment.

"So, doc... what's the prescription?" Jake asked in a joking tone once he was home and resting in a chair on his porch.

“Rest, meditation, and to stay active, at least mentally, to stimulate recovery,” Eron answered in his usual serious tone. “I estimate this extreme weakness you are experiencing should last at most two weeks more, while fully healing your soul will take a lot longer. Naturally, avoid facing anything with soul attacks as you are very susceptible to those, and before fully recovering, I would be careful about overusing your boosting skill and any kind of time dilation has to be avoided no matter what, as it can hamper your natural recovery. If you wish for a more pleasant recovery, using soul-soothing natural treasures or alchemical creations might be an option, but they will not assist in your recovery, and I would advise you against trying to speed it up using any kind of external support. The most complete recovery is the one your body will naturally have.”

Jake nodded and, after a bit of hesitation, asked: “Any insight on the damaged skill in question?”

Eron chuckled in response. “It’s good to see you can remain humorous despite your circumstances.”

... so that was definitely a no.

“Gotta stay positive,” Jake just laughed along before sighing. “I sure did mess up badly this time around.”

“Yes, you did,” Eron agreed. “You’re almost as bad as the morons who rode motorcycles before the arrival of the system. Did you know those death machines were dozens of times more prone to accidents than cars, not to mention the death rate should you get into an accident? Like you, those idiots also tended to significantly overestimate their own abilities, all the way up till they landed on my table.”

“Not sure how good of a comparison that is, and I get the faint feeling you weren’t a fan of motorbikes,” Jake smiled.

“I despise death, and I abhor people who put their lives in danger for no good reason,” Eron scoffed. “At least you have the excuse that should you succeed, you would achieve significant gains in your Path. All a damn biker would earn was slightly better fuel economy, assuming they were driving alone.”

“You know, my dad wanted a bike at one point, but my mom forbid it,” Jake commented.

“A wise woman,” Eron nodded in approval.

“Yeah, she thought the insurance was way too expensive,” Jake smirked, earning a disapproving look from Eron.

“I don’t think you understand the damage not addressing such a dangerous method of transportation caused to-“

For the next twenty minutes, Jake repaid Eron for his help by allowing him to rant about motorcycles, just nodding along during it all. He definitely had a lot of thoughts on the subject, and Jake couldn’t remember a time the guy had talked so much while remaining so normal.

Luckily, Eron was able to stop himself after a while, at which point he seemed to realize he had other things to do.

“Look at the time; I’ll take my leave now,” Eron said, having vented his hatred of motorcycles and their continued legality all the way up the integration. “I wish you luck in your recovery and remember to stay somewhat active even if it hurts. If you need my assistance, simply let me know and I shall see what I can do.”

“Thanks for the offer and all the help so far,” Jake said in a grateful tone. “And I promise to never ride a motorbike for the rest of my life.”

Eron didn’t comment on Jake’s teasing but just waved him off as the healer left the valley and Jake alone. With him gone, Jake sighed and slumped back on the chair while grimacing. “Should have asked for some pain meds...”

Alas, Jake was pretty sure something like that didn’t exist... besides maybe taking something soul-soothing, as Eron had mentioned. That was perhaps worth considering, but for now, he annoyingly did have a few things he needed to do.

He needed to talk to Miranda about everything that went down and get others up to speed with what he learned about this “I” figure. There was also his connection to the Fallen King that felt odd. Jake was confident that the Unique Lifeform had been affected by what Jake did; he just wasn’t sure how. So, talking to him once the King was back was definitely something Jake had to do.

As a final thing, before he reached out to people... when it came to his Palate of the Malefic Viper and the internal stomach, it was just as the Viper had said. Jake couldn't even look inside it, and it felt like the space was utterly sealed off. The only trace it was even there was the incredibly slight feeling of something being absorbed. The half-a-Planetary Core was still being consumed, albeit so slowly Jake could barely register it, but at least it was something and proof that the skill continued to function for the most part.

The biggest problem was definitely what the Viper had mentioned about upgrading it. In its current state, Jake couldn't be able to get any upgrades no matter how much insight he got about the skill. It was locked at legendary rarity, which wasn't the worst, but he would need it fixed at some point, and he doubted even an evolution to B-grade would help anything. Shit, maybe an evolution would even downgrade it.

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Perhaps the only thing Jake could hope for was that Villy would find a solution while Jake finished up this damn system event. That... or the meeting he would have when he reached level 300 in his profession, could end up helping in an unforeseen way.

Only time would tell. For now, he had to talk to Miranda.

Getting up from his lawn chair, Jake went into the lodge and used the magic landline phone to contact the local witch. Just infusing the item with mana to make the call felt painful, but he soldiered through long enough. She quickly picked up, worried.

"I heard reports you returned to your lodge with Eron... what happened?"

"I think it's better you come over in person... using this thing is giving me a headache," Jake said, really not liking the sensation of using his mana to speak right now. It was like the magical variety of having a really sore throat and being forced to talk loudly.

"Alright, I'll be over shortly once I finish up here," she said, Jake shutting off the connection after that as he saw no reason to continue straining himself by keeping it active.

Jake went to relax as he waited for her to arrive, lying down and resting. He felt like shit, and he couldn't help but admonish himself for the shitty timing of doing this during a system event with a limited duration. Especially not one that also included interacting with other factions, including Ell'Hakan.

It was also just after Arnold and company made the teleporter somewhat functional, allowing them to assist the planets outside the alliance. This should be a prime time to go around killing Prima Guardians and gathering potential allies – or at least assuring other factions wouldn't side with Ell'Hakan.

But, as Jake was now, that wasn't a possibility. Even if he recovered somewhat, it was incredibly risky to travel around. Before, Jake didn't care about being caught in some silly trap, as he was confident in escaping or fighting anyone who tried to mess with him... but now?

Well... alright, Jake still had confidence in escaping, just not the consequences of doing so. He ultimately still had his Jake Juice and could use it on himself to put up a good fight, and he did believe doing so would remove all that currently ailed him... at least for a while. But after, shit was bound to be even worse than they were now. Exactly how bad things would be, Jake didn't plan on finding out.

In summary, Jake would effectively be useless for a good while. Perhaps he could help out once he'd recovered a bit, but even so, he wasn't sure if he should. If Ell'Hakan noticed Jake had severe soul damage, he would definitely try and take advantage. No, it was better to hide away and just act uninterested. No one should really know what had happened outside of Eron, the Fallen King, and Miranda.

Even if someone did learn he suffered from soul damage, Jake doubted Ell'Hakan would believe it without any proof. It could just as easily be a ploy to bait in the other Chosen, after all. So, staying back and not providing any definite proof Jake was feeling under the weather felt like the right way to go.

Time passed, and around half an hour later, Miranda arrived at the lodge. Jake saw her coming through his sphere, which he had also felt forced to reduce in size to lessen the mental strain. Pulses were entirely out of the question for now.

Miranda walked into the lodge and saw Jake lying on an old sofa. She looked him over and frowned. "You look like shit."

"Glad the outside matches my insides, I guess," Jake said with a wry smile.

"What happened? What exactly did you encounter on that planet?" Miranda asked, worried.

"Well... it isn't as much what I encountered on the planet but what I tried to do there..." Jake said as he gave a brief explanation of what had gone down, of course leaving out some of the details he probably shouldn't share. He did share just enough for her to get the gist of everything as she sighed.

"This was bound to happen at some point, you know that, right?" she said in a slightly scolding tone.

"Someone else pretty smart told me the same thing," Jake could only agree.

"So how do you wanna deal with this situation?" Miranda asked in a serious tone. "People will notice your absence. Especially Ell'Hakan's goons, who seem to have been tracking you and where you went. We can, of course, do nothing, but that may only lead to speculation... and it isn't like the actual truth will do us any good."

"I'm more worried about how this will impact the system event," Jake shook his head. "We were competing pretty well with Ell'Hakan and the expansion of his alliance..."

"That will be difficult now, yes, but it's more important to get you back in good condition. Did Eron have any suggestions for a quicker recovery? Does Haven have any resources capable of helping? Maybe you can ask Sandy if they have some treasure stored?"

"Eron suggested bedrest," Jake answered, not hiding that he wasn't happy about it. "At least for the first couple of weeks. After that, I can do some things, but I'm still limited."

"I see," Miranda said in a solemn tone. "You are definitely to stay on Earth. I will have a meeting with everyone else relevant and figure out how we'll deal with this. Once Sylphie, Vesperia, and the Fallen King return, perhaps we should also have one of them stay with you for safety."

Jake wanted to protest as he found the notion of having a protector insulting... but did he really have the right to complain when all this shit was his fault?

In the end, he just stayed quiet, resigning himself to let Miranda do what she thought was best.

The two of them spoke for a bit longer before she left Jake to rest. He also told her to please not let anyone else visit that day, as honestly, Jake really just wanted to have a good nap. Whenever he was young, he could sleep off most minor sicknesses, and while this certainly was a lot more major... sleep would at least make all the pain go away for a while.

It took barely any time before Jake entered dreamland, naturally having moved to sleep in his good old bed from all the way back in the Tutorial Challenge Dungeon.

"Are you certain you are alright now?" the True Royal asked the Unique Lifeform as the Fallen King was still sitting on a tree stump within the forest he had crashed into when he suddenly stopped flying.

"It has passed, yes," the King answered as he felt his own body. Golden cracks had appeared on the mask but were healing rather quickly. Far quicker than if the Fallen King had been the one to cause the damage to his own soul. It wasn't hard for him to realize what had happened, either.

Jake's soul had been in an incident that caused it to take tremendous damage on a fundamental level, reaching deep enough to even hurt the Fallen King due to their connection. The Unique Lifeform couldn't forget: If Jake died, the Fallen King would also die... and this instance had been very close.

Far too close for comfort.

"What caused this?" Vesperia kept questioning, Sylphie also looking worried.

For a moment, the Fallen King considered if sharing the truth would be wise, and ultimately decided hiding it would do him no good. It was far more likely they would discover the truth later and connect the dots, thus affecting their perception of the Fallen King negatively.

"Your Sire was involved in something," the King said, making sure to communicate only to her and the bird. "I do not know more than that he has suffered some form of severe soul damage. The semi-permanent kind, at the very least."

Instantly, the mood changed. Vesperia got a severe look on her face as she turned to the hapless World Leader they had been escorting to the Prima Vessel. "We need to get back as quickly as possible."

"I shall fly as fast as I ca-"

"Not fast enough," Vesperia said in a cold tone.

"Ree?" Sylphie let out a small screech, looking at the Fallen King with big eyes.

"I do not know, little one. We will not learn the exact situation before we return," the Fallen King answered. "I will need a moment, so-"

"I understand," Vesperia nodded, turning to Sylphie. "Speed above all else."

"Ree!" Sylphie agreed, and before the World Leader could even respond, he was launched into the air and sent flying far faster than his travel speed.

"Will you...?"

"Yes, I shall return on my own," the Fallen King gave her the go-ahead as the True Royal didn't wait to follow after Sylphie, leaving the Fallen King behind.

After about a minute, the Fallen King lifted his hand and ran his claw along the fractures in the mask. This connection with the hunter had yet to truly pose an issue so far, but ... this incident was a reminder...

I cannot be content. This is untenable and utterly unacceptable. No more hesitation or needless delays. I shall reclaim my own dominion fully... and be fallen no longer.

Chapter 973: A Tough Job To Do

Jake seriously sucked at doing his current job. He kept trying to avoid it, only to get hit by the realization that he didn't really have much of a choice in the matter. As for what his job was that Jake was so god damn horrible at?

To do nothing.

He was not good at doing nothing.

After sleeping for nearly a full day after returning to his lodge, Jake had woken up with his resources mostly restored and his headache not as bad as before. He was still super weak, but he at least felt like he could do some minor tasks. Maybe he could even do a bit of light alchemy experimentation?

Nope.

Jake had tried and was struck by a headache that made it impossible to focus whenever he tried to do anything straining. Next up, he tried his Puzzle Box of the Seeker, and while it wasn't as straining due to not really using much mana, it still took full concentration and a calm mind to properly work with, and getting intermittent headaches while trying to beat levels wasn't very productive. Quite the opposite, as failing a level due to a sudden bout of pain after spending a long time progressing only led to frustration, which led to more headaches, which led to more frustration.

Not that he could find anything actually productive to do. His body was weak, so he couldn't do much with that, and using resources hurt and broke concentration, making any task that took intense concentration borderline impossible.

In the end, he did settle on doing what little he could: read books. Not as fast as he usually could, and he had to stay away from the too-complicated stuff, but at least it made him feel like he wasn't completely wasting his time and being useless.

After a bit of reading and relaxing, Jake began to feel better. He also got an idea on the second day as he went down to his laboratory beneath the lodge and into the reservoir. There, he found a potential help to his current ailment: the Dewstone of Serenity and the Serene Water.

If anything could help him, it had to be this, right? The Dewstone had even been made to heal someone in the first place, as per the description:

...A small stone created by the combined effort of a group of water nymphs to help heal a close friend...

This was even further echoed by the water the Dewstone helped create:

...This water calms the mind of anyone who consumes it, allowing them to more easily focus while suppressing the effects of most mental afflictions. Continued consumption will help heal minor soul injuries...

Jake definitely didn't expect this to be some kind of cure, but he did hope it would at least help with the pain. Testing it out, he did discover that the water had a soothing effect, which, even if it wasn't actually helping him heal faster, would at least make the process more comfortable. In other words, it was pain meds water.

That's how Jake ended up chilling in a makeshift hot tub of Serene Water he had poured while occasionally drinking a bit from a second container. Being down in the laboratory for a good portion of the day also helped sell one of the many lies Miranda had spread that Jake was busy doing alchemy and was working on some big project.

Days passed with Jake doing nothing productive outside of slowly recovering and reading low-level books. While he despised not being able to do more, it was at least comforting he could see the healing progressing. Quite literally so, as it was shown on his status.

Status

Mana Points (MP): 139,556/199,441 (442,484)

His limited mana pool had gone from a maximum of 198,367 to 199,441, which wasn't a lot, but it was something. As the worst period of weakness began to wear off, the recovery should also accelerate somewhat. At least, that's what Eron told him when he talked with Jake over the phone. The healer wanted to go in person, but Miranda believed that would be a bad idea as it would give credence to any rumors that Jake was seriously injured.

In fact, Miranda wanted to limit Jake's contact with anyone. This was to tell the story that he was too busy, and Jake's existing reputation as a loner who didn't like to be disturbed helped him out here. All this was only temporary until Sylphie, Vesperia, and the Fallen King returned to Earth, as there was little doubt the three of them would visit, and the plan was still to have at least one of them remain around Jake for protection during his recovery.

It ended up taking a few more days of Jake suffering through doing fuck-all before he finally got word that Sylphie and Vesperia had returned. To keep up appearances, they would first stop by Miranda before going over to Jake's place. Sylphie offered to just sneak them over to Jake's place, but considering Sylphie's interpretation of the word stealth, it was determined this method was better.

Jake was sitting by the pond looking at the eels swimming around when he felt the two of them enter the valley. He barely had time to turn to look at them as a green ball of feathers flew over and nearly crashed into him.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, stopping right in front of Jake, still kicking up a lot of dust and disturbing the surface of the pond, scaring the poor eels to dive deeper.

"Good to see you, too," Jake smiled as he reached out and gave her some scratches, the bird quickly getting comfortable sitting in his lap.

"What is the current state of your body and soul?" Vesperia asked, getting straight to the point while walking over with hurried steps, clearly trying to keep her usual calm and collected persona up. Spoiler: she wasn't doing a very good job at that.

"Body is mostly fine; it's the soul that's the problem," Jake shook his head and sighed.

"Ree?"

"The worst period of weakness should be over within the week I hope, while the rest will take a lot longer," Jake explained. "But, hey, in a week, I shouldn't be useless anymore, just less useful than before my... unfortunate accident."

"Is there truly nothing to be done?" Vesperia asked. "The Endless Empire has many methods to help recover more quickly, even from severe soul damage."

"I don't doubt the resources or knowledge of the Endless Empire, but the--"

Jake quickly stopped himself as he was about to say that the Malefic Viper had told him he should just wait, but sharing that he had spoken to the Viper at all was kind of precarious, so Jake quickly saved it.

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"-healer called Eron told me that natural recovery is the best, and I would lean toward trusting his judgement."

"I am aware the man has a Bloodline and it quite competent in his own right, but he is still only C-grade," Vesperia insisted.

"Look, if you have something in mind, I'm not going to outright reject it, but seeing as we're cut off from the rest of the multiverse during this system event, we don't have anyone besides C-grades available to do anything," Jake said, shaking his head. "And of all the C-grade healers I've ever met, I would trust Eron's assessment the most. Doubt he became the Chosen of the Lifesoul Daolord for nothing."

Vesperia looked uncertain for a few moments before just nodding. "Alright... but if you aren't fully healed by the time the system event en--"

"I bloody well expect to be," Jake interrupted her as the notion sent a shiver down his spine, so much so that he didn't even want her to fully vocalize it. Alright, he didn't expect to fix Palate, but his soul should at least be good by that time if he fully relaxed, leaving him with only the damaged skill to address.

"But if you're not, allow me to send a message back and ask for ideas," Vesperia still insisted, Jake eventually just agreeing to keep the peace.

"Ree?" Sylphie, who had really snuggled herself into Jake's lap, asked.

“Right, there was also that,” Jake sighed. “Miranda is pretty damn insistent someone should stay around and waste their time here with me doing fuck-all just because I fucked up. Something I don’t feel good about requesting at all...”

Maybe he could argue with Miranda that it really wasn’t needed, so he could avoi-

“It would be best for me to remain by your side,” Vesperia said instantly, even raising a hand. “There are no more planets that need my immediate attention, and as a True Royal, it was never expected of me to be someone taking the frontlines in the first place. My only true connection to this planet is also only Sire, so it would logically make sense that I choose to remain close to you and your home, plus, I promised the other True Royals before leaving I would stick mostly with you. Finally, I do need to focus on my internal Hive and fully rebuilding my Queens’s Guards, so I did, in truth, plan on staying on Earth in the first place.”

“Ree,” Sylphie looked at Vesperia, who had just gotten done spewing off all the reasons to stay she could get off the top of her head.

“I don’t believe that is necessary,” Vesperia argued against Sylphie’s argument.

“Ree.”

“Hm...”

“Ree.”

“An acceptable compromise,” Vesperia agreed with a nod, turning to Jake. “The two of us will stay here until the weakness lingering in your body lessens. Once there is only the long-term damage left to deal with, I will remain on my lonesome. At that time, should an emergency arise, you should be fully capable of defending yourself, correct?”

“Right,” Jake nodded, not a massive fan of not even being included in the discussion, but oh well.

“Then that’s settled,” Vesperia said in a satisfied tone.

“Say... wasn’t the Fallen King with you two?” Jake changed the topic once bodyguard duties were established.

“He chose to stay behind temporarily and will return to Earth at his own pace,” Vesperia said. “From the looks of it, whatever happened to you spilled over and affected him significantly, too, and it appeared like he had some soul damage of his own to heal, though it was far less than you are dealing with.”

“I... see,” Jake sighed, feeling really shitty that his bad decision-making dealt collateral damage to the Unique Lifeform. He had always fully supported the King’s intentions of entirely splitting off from Jake, but before, he hadn’t really seen it as anything with urgency. Now, he hoped the Fallen King would figure out a method sooner rather than later so this wouldn’t even happen again... because Jake was definitely going to mess up again sometime in the future.

Despite how much he fucked up this situation, Jake wouldn’t stop doing risky shit. Risks and rewards would always be intertwined due to how Records and the system worked, and as Villy had said, Jake shouldn’t stop experimenting and taking risks just because of one setback. He should just have at least one extra step of asking himself: “Is this a really moronic thing to do?” before moving forward.

“Worrying over the Unique Lifeform isn’t necessary,” Vesperia tried to comfort Jake. “He shall easily make his way back when he so desires, and even if he was temporarily weakened, there was nothing on that planet even capable of posing a danger.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Jake waved her off. He knew the King was strong and even had his trump card if things got too hairy.

The three of them spoke a bit more as the hawk and True Royal got comfortable.

With Sylphie and Vesperia now also there at the lodge, Jake felt like chilling in his hot tub or just reading books all the time would be rude, especially as he hadn’t spent that much time with them recently and had never actually spent that much time around Vesperia, period.

Sylphie also wasn’t the best at doing nothing, and Jake feared that her finding ways to entertain herself would lead to something Miranda would complain about, so he needed some other ways to keep them entertained, at least until Sylphie left. Vesperia could easily keep herself busy working on Hive Queen

stuff and her internal world. This left him with something hugely impactful to consider, with potentially the safety of Haven itself at risk:

... what good card games are there for three people? Oh, and it needs to be bird-friendly...

It was only natural for a beta test to have some problems in the initial stages. However, this time, the test had actually gone above and beyond expectations, enough so to be labeled a full-on success. Yet the beta tester was still left with severe issues that the inventors of the teleporter would take no legal or moral responsibility for as it was solely due to his own actions.

Considering that and how the teleporter had clearly worked the first time around, Arnold was soon ready for his second test subject. After much deliberation of who would be best to send, they landed on someone who would have potentially been even better than Jake to send in the first place. At least if one was talking about going to the red planets and helping them defeat their Prima Guardians.

A man who had a political mind, allowing him to expertly handle the native population and naturally also the power to handle the Prima on his lonesome. Moreover, it was someone with an even more effective and reliable method of returning to Earth should anything go wrong. With the right prep work, that is.

"A good view to capture in this moment in time," the Sword Saint said as he finished painting the landscape in front of him.

"To seal a snapshot of the concept of time within a painting, allowing you to bypass the usual restrictions placed upon travel through space... it's an interesting application," Arnold commented from behind.

"It's not perfect," Miyamoto shook his head. "Space still contorts time, which is why I selected a planet not too far away. I am far from confident in traveling across an entire galaxy, at least not without significant assistance."

"More than the circle?" Arnold inquired further.

"A lot more than a magic circle," he shook his head, having already prepared the circle as he started painting.

All of this was done to allow the Sword Saint to use his painting to return back to Earth in case of an emergency. Rather than call it teleportation, the Sword Saint instead captured himself and the world around him in a specific moment in time, and through the painting, he could return there. Of course, Miyamoto couldn't actually turn back time, only his physical location. This was by far his best skill as a painter – a profession he did not use actively as much as he certainly should.

Not to say he didn't constantly use it while practicing, as it even helped his swordsmanship. The Path he walked was as much about simply swinging a sword as it was about visualizing the world, the concepts he controlled, and the future he envisioned for himself. Painting his thoughts and ideas allowed him to turn them not only tangible but entrench them in his mind, as to paint something, he had to truly be able to imagine it.

"Ultimately, the probability of you needing the painting in the first place isn't high," Arnold also pointed out. "The Prima Vessel should still exist on the planet even if they prove hostile, and I'm certain you could use that to return, even if it takes threatening the native population with annihilation should they refuse to assist you."

"I hope to avoid needless violence," Miyamoto shook his head.

"Most people do, but their refusal to assist you could easily be classified as a need," the scientist said, the Sword Saint only able to nod in agreement.

"Certainly so. Now, let us proceed. I do wonder just how well this teleporter of yours will work," Miyamoto said as they headed toward the teleportation circle, and after going over a few things, he took his place in the center of the circle.

It quickly came to life as Arnold looked down at his tablet. "Ah, minor note. The last tester said the process may feel a bit... rough."

"It shouldn't be any problem," the Sword Saint dismissed the notion... only to regret it a few minutes later as he was reminded of why he had never been a big fan of rollercoasters before the system arrived.

Chapter 974: Not A Good Start

Being alone and useless had been quite a miserable experience, but the return of Sylphie and Vesperia had at least added something interesting to Jake's everyday life. They naturally didn't have much to do around the lodge either, and they had to keep things quiet and not make a mess, forcing them to stay inside most of the time. Something poor Sylphie had a hard time with as she couldn't even fly around and have fun.

Vesperia was a lot calmer and seemed like the sort who could easily sit in meditation for a few centuries without complaint. Sylphie was really the exact opposite of Vesperia despite them being kind of siblings, something that was weird to think about when he remembered that Sylphie was the older of the two... a fact he made sure everyone knew about.

Jake had to wrack his mind a lot – which wasn't a pleasant experience – to find a way to keep Sylphie entertained, which did kind of help keep himself occupied mentally. He had a few things in the lodge for entertainment, such as playing cards and a few board games that he wasn't even sure when had gotten there.

Playing cards with three people was always hard, and poker with that few sucked, so he couldn't really find anything fun there. As he went through the different board games, he found some of the good old ones there, such as chess, checkers, and a few different dice games, but also some more complicated ones that he seriously didn't want to try and teach Sylphie in the week or so she would spend there.

Sylphie did turn out to be pretty good at some of the simpler games, and honestly, there was something precious about playing with a giant wasp amazoness and a small hawk moving her pieces with a talon while screeching in victory as she beat Jake and Vesperia by being better at rolling the special die Arnold had created that assured complete randomness with every roll.

Did Vesperia and Jake let Sylphie win? Of course not, fuck that. They were all way too competitive to let someone else win on purpose.

Anyway, Sylphie was good at dice games and she enjoyed it a lot, especially because Vesperia wasn't a fan. Jake and the hawk also enjoyed teasing the eels, who were very scared of the green bird. Jake did have to remind Sylphie not to peck any of them, and eventually, he had to drag her off when a brave eel tried to bite the talon she was poking the surface of the water with.

Vesperia, on the other hand, turned out to be a big fan of chess. Chess was also one of the few games where Jake didn't really have any advantages at all due to his Bloodline. His intuition didn't seem to do

much, and as there was no danger, but it was all just play, most of his senses didn't seem to care much about what was happening.

Jake himself had never been a massive chess fan or super good at it, but he did at least know the rules and had played a bit in the past. Vesperia knew about the game, though her versions were a bit different and ones she offered to show Jake later.

Yes, versions. Plural. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that a game like chess was also known in the wider universe, nor that there were numerous iterations, pretty much all of them far more complex than the Earth version.

The two of them ended up mostly playing basic chess, though. Jake was still in his heavy recovery phase at this time, and playing mega-chess was bound to induce a headache. Plus, ultimately, all of this was just an excuse for the three of them to relax and bond. At least that was one of the excuses Jake used for why he was constantly losing. They were just playing for fun, right?

Either way, despite playing games and messing about, most of their time was spent talking or chilling. Vesperia shared much knowledge about the Endless Empire and some of the other innate knowledge she had. She had a lot of exciting stories and legends from her faction, which both Sylphie and Jake enjoyed listening to.

Sylphie also shared some of her own adventures, though she truthfully hadn't experienced much Jake or Vesperia weren't aware of. She did have some unique stories from Nevermore, but other than that, it was mostly about times she spent way too long chasing down small critters only to let them go once caught because Sylphie was too strong and cool to hurt them.

Overall, Jake had six good days with the two of them, which included a lot of bonding. He still made sure to also consume some Serene Water during this time to help him keep a cool head and for its effect from continued consumption to stay active. He still wasn't sure how much it helped, but at least it made him feel better.

By the seventh day, Jake was feeling a lot better. He had gradually improved ever since he returned to Earth and was healed by Eron, but on that day, it was like a switch flipped, and Jake felt power return to his body.

"You are looking a lot better," Vesperia pointed out when she saw Jake walk out onto the porch after he'd woken up from his daily nap – because sleeping was truly the best way to recover.

"I'm also feeling a lot better," Jake smiled as he cracked his head. "Not back to full for sure, and my resources are still fucked, but I feel like I could take on Prima Guardian or two at least."

"Recovery is still your priority, and you should stay here on Earth until you are fully healed," Vesperia said in a tone that was a mix of scolding and concern.

"I know, I know," Jake said with a sigh. "And I will stay. It just feels good to not be entirely useless anymore. Now I can actually defend myself if necessary without doing something that could easily lead to even worse long-term injuries."

"Ree?" Sylphie, who had already taken her spot on top of his head the moment he had been on the porch for three seconds, asked.

"If you want to," Jake answered. "I can take care of myself now if you want to go have fun elsewhere."

"Ree..." Sylphie screeched, sounding a bit guilty.

"It's fine. Go be the little feathered hero I know you can be," Jake said with a big smile as he reached up and lifted her off his head for a good hug and head pat.

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Sylphie snuggled for a bit before raising her head with determination. "Ree!"

"You go get 'em," Jake shook his head and laughed as he let Sylphie take off with a triumphant screech as she prepared to conquer – eh, save – even more unfortunate planets of the galaxy.

He watched her fly away as Vesperia went over to the porch and sat down on the steps in front of him while also seeing her off. She sat there for a bit as she threw glances at Jake, who knew what she was getting at as he placed a hand on top of her head and ruffled her hair.

"Were you shy or something?" Jake asked jokingly, seeing as Vesperia hadn't done this for all the time Sylphie had been there, but the second she was gone...

"She needed it more," Vesperia said in a low tone, with a big smile on her face as she leaned into his hand. "I will stay here for a lot longer, after all."

"True," Jake nodded as he stared toward the sky. Lots of things were happening, and Jake hated not being able to take part. It wasn't that he hated not actually taking part. He hated the fact he didn't really have a choice in the matter.

During this week, the Fallen King had also returned to Earth again but hadn't bothered to come by. He had just sent a quick message he would go recover on his own and then make use of Arnold's teleporter to go visit some red planets.

According to the King, he doubted many planets would accept if he signed up to go and assist them, but if he went with Arnold's teleporter, they would have any choice but to accept his help or face making an even more dangerous creature than the Prima Guardian their enemy.

Sylphie's plan was to join some people from Earth to help those from the alliance still needing assistance. Kindroth still had an entire list, and with Jake out of commission and the Sword Saint busy taking over Jake's beta-testing duties, they were severely understaffed. For Sylphie to offer assistance by going along with a group of pretty weak people to effectively kill the Guardian solo while just acting like an animal companion was not something Jake could see people reject.

He also knew that with time, others would also return to Earth, and more factions would begin to make their move. Valhal and the Court of Shadows would both offer assistance to whoever was willing to pay them. Maria had apparently already managed to get herself hired, and several more of the powerful fighters on Earth would begin to travel the galaxy more. Even if they weren't strong enough to kill Prima Guardians themselves, groups such as the elite parties from the Noboru Clan could offer great assistance anyway. If not against the Guardians, then the regular Primas till they all felt ready to take down the final boss.

There was also what could only be called a domino effect as more and more planets finished dealing with the event. Powerful groups, including World Leaders, would travel elsewhere to help out, with those helped then able to also offer assistance.

This was especially the case with planets part of Ell'Hakan's alliance. They were all far more stable civilizations from the get-go, while many of those Jake and the others helped had been less than organized, and the World Leader and other powerful figures had to stay back and stabilize things to avoid civil wars or deal with the fallout from the event.

On Earth, they were also dealing with their own cultural battle due to the continued establishment and development of the Risen. Casper was the guy in charge after he'd helped the one other Risen planet in the galaxy deal with their Guardian. To make this new land for the Risen, he had to put down a shitload of formations, and Jake also heard that Miranda had helped them get a Pylon of Civilization for their own little island.

Jake truthfully didn't have many thoughts on the protests, though he did find it a bit hypocritical that some of the non-human freed slaves were complaining about the Risen being allowed to live on Earth, having somehow forgotten that just a few years ago, they were the source of protests.

Needless to say, Miranda kept Jake and the others updated throughout his recovery about everything that was going on with Earth and the galaxy as a whole. It didn't sound like anything overly surprising was happening anywhere, and the only unsettling news was the continued spread of "I's" influence as even more planets were destroyed.

Not that Jake could do anything about it in his current state.

Jake recovering from the most immediate weakness, allowed him to do some more things. Alchemy was still a bit troublesome as he still felt a stinging pain whenever he strained his mana usage too much. However, he could now do one more thing... one very important way to spend his time had been unlocked, especially now that Sylphie was gone and Vesperia could dedicate herself more to her own tasks. Truly, he was blessed...

Because it was playtime with his little puzzle box!

With Vesperia busy and Jake chilling in his bathtub later the same day Sylphie left, he took out the cube and admired it.

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box

will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level. Levels completed: (289/10000).

Jake had completed a few levels in Nevermore, but not that many, as he didn't have as much time as he would have liked to play with it. Every level also only got harder and harder. With ten thousand levels total, Jake had so much to look forward to. From the beginning, he had known that the cube wasn't something he would solve any time soon, but he still wanted to keep doing levels, primarily to avoid having an early Nevermore situation.

That's to say, a situation where Jake was just breezing through challenges to get to the hard parts. Luckily, that wasn't an issue quite yet, and with the Serene Water soothing his soul, Jake immersed his consciousness inside the cube as he appeared within to see his task for level 290.

Smiling, Jake saw he had to ensure a defensive wall was capable of holding against an assault from a projected army. This wall had the shape of a hexagon and protected a city within, with Jake's requirement for clearing this level that no damage was done to the city at all. This meant the wall being damaged was fine...

Looking over the wall, he saw it was in utter disrepair and was filled with flaws, and the formation embedded in it to protect the city from attacks coming from below and above was utterly busted. Everything looking so shitty only made him happier as he had a good challenge on his hands, and it felt damn good to finally feel at least a little productive again.

Time to get to work!

Wariness was only to be expected when an unknown figure descended from the skies, seemingly out of nowhere. At least Miyamoto believed so as he arrived on the planet he had been teleported close to by the scientist's torture device with a side effect allowing cross-galaxy teleportation.

The first thing he confirmed after he stopped dry-heaving from the experience of the atrocious device was to make sure his painting worked and would allow him to return at any point. With that confirmed, he spent a bit getting through the atmosphere of the planet, which was far from an easy or pleasant experience, but he had come prepared and managed to get through.

Descending down toward the planet, he wasn't sure if he had gotten lucky or unlucky with where he appeared or if this was perhaps just how the teleporter worked, but he was already near the Prima Vessel and could see it in the distance as he broke through a few layers of clouds.

What he also saw was an army of beastfolk marching in formation toward the Prima Vessel. An army that quickly spotted him, and before he could even introduce himself... they overreacted to their own wariness.

A commander yelled; the formation changed, and Miyamoto sighed as the sky lit up with magic, arrows, and a bunch of other projectiles flying his way, as his interactions with the first red planet he'd come to assist didn't come off to a good start.

Chapter 975: An Old Man's Measured Approach

Floating in the air, the Sword Saint raised a hand as he swept it in front of him, forming a swirling plane of water that met all the attacks coming for him. Everything passed through it and was misdirected to fly by him as he had already taken note of what he was dealing with, and it was all very... odd.

The army below was large, but it was not powerful. From the power of the attacks, he felt nearly only D-grades in the crowd, and after using some Identifies, he confirmed that these armies were made up nearly entirely of D-grades with a few C-grade commanders in the mix, save for one small squad.

Having dealt with the first barrage of attacks, the army below wasn't showing any reaction besides releasing another attempt at his life. Miyamoto sighed as he quickly scanned the battlefield and noticed it had a rather classical setup, but not one actually made for warfare. It was purely a marching formation, and seeing as the immediate area all around the Prima Vessel was clean, much of the dirt showing signs of prior marches, he quickly reached a conclusion.

An army for show.

Misdirecting the next set of attacks, the Sword Saint saw no need to take a third as he dove down toward the army. Only now did they seem to realize they were dealing with a problematic opponent, and in an instant, panic set in.

The armies scrambled as the C-grade commanders yelled words of order, but none of them listened besides two companies, including one that Miyamoto had noticed from the beginning as they stood out due to their far worse equipment and the fact they were all beastfolk of the same variant.

Beastfolk, or beastkin as they were also called, were a rather diverse race, much like scalekin. Their only common trait was their bestial ancestry, but that ancestry could vary widely and would affect their variant races significantly. This particular army with shabby equipment was all of the same kind of beastkin and, from the looks of it, had their ancestry in a bull or other similar bovine of some fashion.

A slave army? Internal discord between variants?

Hopefully, he would soon have his answer as Miyamoto successfully located the leader of this entire group. The second company that retained order, besides this one he suspected to be made up of slaves, also had the best equipment and was definitely some kind of elite squad going by how they were all C-grades. Low-tier C-grades, but C-grades still, with their leader a large bear-like beastkin standing in the middle with a two-handed axe. This wasn't necessarily the commander in charge of the army, but he was certainly the strongest based on how many of the panicking soldiers threw glances at him. Miyamoto knew that beastkin tended to structure their societies strictly around power... something that wasn't exactly unique to them, true, but he believed it a safe bet in this case to approach the strongest.

A few attacks were still thrown his way, but the Sword Saint ignored them as he appeared in front of the elite army with the bearkin towering above the other soldiers staring straight at him.

"I do not come as an enemy," Miyamoto spoke in a calm tone. "And I apologize if that was your interpretation of my presence."

The beastkin, who had looked ready to attack, stared at him suspiciously as he answered in a tone that made it clear she was a female, making the Sword Saint get a pang of embarrassment that he masterfully hid.

"Who are you? Who are you with?" the female bearkin asked with an almost accusatory tone.

"I am with no one; I just arrived on this planet," the Sword Saint answered, deciding to limit the information he would give away until he knew more.

"Lies, the Fourth King did not enter the Prima Guardian Alliance," the bearkin answered, now with their guard even more up than before, yet having also disclosed some valuable information.

"I never made such claims," Miyamoto said with a light smile as he looked up toward the sky where he came from as he purposefully radiated his aura and power. "I am from a world that defeated our Prima Guardian shortly after the event began, and taking advantage of what lies within the Prima Vessel, we became able to travel elsewhere in the galaxy... even to the worlds not part of the alliance."

His words weren't lies. The scientist had taken inspiration from and made use of what was within the Prima Vessel to make his own horrendous teleportation device.

The bearkin looked conflicted as the Sword Saint decided to retain the initiative of the conversation. "I shall inform you now that I came alone. My sole intent is to slay the Prima Guardian, but should good reason be given, I can offer assistance with other urgent matters to help stabilize the planet."

It was clear this C-grade who was in charge of a for-show march to guard the Prima Vessel wasn't someone who could actually make decisions, but she could direct him to someone who could. This entire conversation had also been conducted openly surrounded by others, and through the whispers and doubtful talk of the soldiers all around him, the Sword Saint quickly got a basic idea of what he was dealing with on this planet.

Three Beast Kings, all in conflict. Yes, only three, as it appeared the First King was already dead, killed by the three others who were now fighting to claim the throne. Apparently, this Prima Vessel was important to claim victory, and right now, the Fourth King had won dominion over it, though from the sounds of it, the giant metal egg had already changed hands many times.

Certainly a mess. Especially with Primas everywhere causing trouble and making everything far more complicated. Some kind of power struggle had somehow ended up taking precedence over what Miyamoto believed was far more important.

The Sword Saint had just presented himself as a potential solution to the problems of these seemingly equally matched factions. An ace that would allow any King who successfully recruited him to claim victory, and he had purposefully shown off his power for just that. Miyamoto also knew the ambitions of a soldier, even if they had a relatively high rank, and he saw the light of ambition in the eyes of the bearkin.

"It... it's maybe possible to get a meeting with the Third King if you are telling the truth," the beastkin said hesitantly.

"Such an arrangement would be wonderful," the Sword Saint said with a comforting smile.

"I will contact high command," the bearkin said as she threw a glance to a soldier who was thrown out of his stupor as he used some kind of skill. The Sword Saint nodded in approval and remained calm, only floating down to stand on the ground to appear less intimidating.

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A few minutes passed before the female beastkin focused on the Sword Saint again.

"We are to meet in another location not far from there. It will only take a single teleportation to get there," the beastkin said, the Sword Saint nodding.

A trap it is... yet to tell if they are simply being cautious or overly foolish. Let us hope it's the former.

He joined the bearkin and a few other soldiers as they made their way to a small forward camp that looked like it was used mainly for supplies for all the marching soldiers. It also had two teleportation circles, with one of them recently deactivated and both rigged to blow. The escort clearly wasn't very comfortable around him, something that was perhaps for the best.

When they reached the circle, the soldiers stopped, and the bearkin took a moment to gather herself. "Let me go through first and check everything is ready. I will send a signal when it's fine to go through."

"Naturally," the Sword Saint smiled, keeping up his friendly demeanor despite having a very good idea of what was waiting for him on the other end of the teleporter.

A few minutes later, one of the soldiers had a small token he was carrying light up, and he threw a look at the Sword Saint as he spoke. "That's the signal."

"So it is," Miyamoto kept smiling as he stepped onto the teleporter. One could argue what he was doing currently was risky, but in truth, he felt no fear. The idle chatter of an army revealed much, including that his level was higher than any of them had ever seen before when it came to enlightened. While that didn't mean he had to be the highest-level person on the planet, it did make him confident in stating he was the strongest.

He could be entirely mistaken, but he believed he wasn't, and besides, Jake couldn't be the only one who took big risks.

Teleporting, the Sword Saint immediately had his suspicions confirmed, as rather than a meeting room or anything like that, he appeared within what looked like an underground chamber, with magic circles covering the floors, walls, and ceiling, as well as around fifty C-grades spread out around the area behind cover, all pointing what looked like old muskets at him.

"I find this welcome rather rude," the Sword Saint said as thick tension filled the air.

From the far end of the room, the only person who wasn't hidden behind cover walked toward him. It was one of the bull-like beastkin who carried a small disc that projected a beastkin figure. Using a slave to communicate like this... truly the cautious sort.

"There have not been any humans on this planet since ancient times, and yet now one appears and claims to be here to save us," the projection said as the bullkin walked over. "To call your presence suspicious would be an understatement."

"I fail to see how the history of your world is related to the ongoing system event," the Sword Saint said in his usual calm voice. "And I believe you have already been informed of my purpose for being here: to kill the Prima Guardian."

"So you claim," the projected beastfolk said, clearly not convinced. "And quite a bold claim at that. I understand you believe yourself powerful, and my warrior also seemed confident you do hold some power... but let me not waste your time or mine: we don't need you."

The Sword Saint raised an eyebrow. "Oh? That is odd because from what I saw, you have not slain the Prima Guardian, which makes your words rather confusing, wouldn't you agree?"

"The Fourth King took the spot as World Leader and is the only one who can unlock the Prima Vessel... I would think someone claiming to be a Prima Guardian Slayer would know that you need the World Leader to release the Guardian before time," the beastkin that the Sword Saint was now convinced was the Third King said.

"Once more, I fail to understand how you connect the dots between my two statements," Miyamoto smiled confidently. "I would merely assume one who is capable of slaying the Guardian is also capable of assuring its release. Or are you incapable of convincing this World Leader of yours to release the Guardian? Perhaps you are too weak to bring him here forcefully? Either way, it serves as a weak excuse for your lack of action."

"You are far from understanding our history... and you never will," the projection said in a cold voice. "I have already claimed the Vessel, and my victory is inevitable. I don't need some interloper from beyond the stars, and if you truly are capable, I can't risk you helping the other Kings. So, let me apologize, traveler... your journey ends here."

"Please, save your apologies," the Sword Saint smiled amicably. "You planned on doing this from the very beginning."

The projection just smirked before it disappeared, and Miyamoto saw the look of abject horror in the eyes of the slave holding the disc. Yet, despite this fear, the D-grade slave tried to tackle Miyamoto as the entire room lit up, and the sound of dozens of gunshots sounded out at once.

Unfortunate but not unexpected.

Drawing his blade, the area all around the Sword Saint was filled with slashes, as the many bullets flying for him were cut in two, and infusing his sword with energy, he created a defensive zone around him. The explosions came just then, but a bubble of water met it, the concept of time draining the powers of the magic circles rapidly.

A few seconds later, the excitement died down as the Sword Saint began walking forward, leaving the beastkin slave behind, not a single injury on their body. Another barrage of shots came just then, but he teleported forward, avoiding them all as the bullets instead hit the walls, making them explode.

The room he had been teleported to had only a single exit – unless he wanted to make his own- at the far end of a spacious hallway. This exit quickly opened as the Sword Saint saw a whole squad of C-grades rush in, the bearkin who had brought him there among them. Out of everyone, she certainly looked the most nervous and like she didn't want to be there.

Good, she will do if it comes down to me needing a guide.

Behind him, the gunmen who had been hiding also came out to surround him in the hallway leading to the exit, trapping him between the two groups. There were a few hundred C-grades at least, only a few of them mid-tier C-grade, with most low-tiers. A fight would simply be a needless endeavor. Bloodshed that would benefit no one.

"I know the Third King, as he calls himself, is listening, so allow me to offer a warning. I have come to kill the Prima Guardian, and I will not leave before that is done. I genuinely wish to do this under peaceful circumstances without unnecessary bloodshed, but should you continually impede my goal, know that forcing my hand will only give victory to the other Kings," Miyamoto spoke, looking at all the clearly nervous C-grades confronting him.

A few moments of silence followed as the Sword Saint addressed the C-grades directly as he didn't want to stand there wasting any more time or allowing them to prepare some other useless method to try and deal with him. "Even if your leader does not allow you to stand down, do not throw away your lives meaninglessly. From this moment onwards, I shall retaliate against any attacks. Please, I implore you, do not end your own Paths out of misguided loyalty toward someone not caring enough about your lives to have a proper conversation with me... and Third King, do not let those loyal to you die for nothing. Prove my words wrong and that these loyal comrades of yours are not mere expendables."

With those words, he began walking forward with steady steps, not holding back his aura at all while holding his sword in hand. With each step, the tension rose, but no one made the first move. As Miyamoto got closer to the group blocking the exit to the underground chamber, they slowly parted, allowing the Sword Saint to continue.

Despite the enemies on all sides, he was calm as could be on the inside, not showing a single hint outwardly either. When he reached the end of the hallway, something finally happened. But it wasn't someone attacking. A figure, flanked by two others, walked down the stairs leading out of the underground chamber, and Miyamoto recognized him as the same person who had been projected before, though with a far more conflicted look on his face now.

"Finally, we meet in person," Miyamoto said as he nodded in greeting. "It gladdens me to see a leader who knows loyalty goes both ways."

The beastfolk man, who looked like he had descended from a lion or tiger, clenched his claw-filled fist as he clearly wasn't comfortable with the situation he had been put in, but at least he understood his own circumstances.

"I... apologize for the rude welcome..." he said, nodding back.

"I do not believe unfortunate circumstances and misunderstanding from a first meeting shall dictate an entire relationship," the Sword Saint said in response. "Let us define what our shared future shall be from this moment forward and put the past to rest."

The Third King nodded slowly as the Sword Saint smiled, sheathing his blade once more, having not drawn a single drop of blood yet that day.

Chapter 976: Setting People Straight

A singular demonstration was all it took to turn himself into a figure of authority above any others. Miyamoto learned quickly that this planet wasn't actually struggling much with the regular Primas, at least not when it came to defending their major cities.

The primary reason for this was the general lack of focus there had been on hunting down regular Primas before the Myriad Paths event, which was in part caused by their culture. As a civilization of purely beastfolk, they viewed hunting down beasts very differently to the more fully humanoid races such as elves, humans, or dwarves, making them generally just leave other beasts alone unless attacked. In fact, it was far more normal to work together with beasts and live side by side with them.

It was much like how humans in the multiverse tended to prefer fighting things that didn't look human at all. Perhaps it was something instinctive or born of Records that one had an innate dislike of killing those of one's own race, and it was clearly also present with these beastkin, directed toward beasts resembling themselves and their ancestors.

Of course, one couldn't ignore the massive war going on among the four factions on the planet that were established shortly after the Tutorial, making the powerful focus on other things. One faction had been far more dominant in the early days, but during the time a World Leader had to be elected, the

Second to Fourth King grouped up to take down the first one after colluding to vote the Fourth King as the World Leader.

With the First King dead and territory to claim, the war just became a threeway, and so had it been ever since then, with no one working together or agreeing on much... until one day, a swordsman descended from the skies.

After the Sword Saint convinced the Third King to talk, he sought out the other two Kings. He strategically chose a battlefield where the two of them used to fight but were now dealing with Primas. In view of scouts from both these factions – and the ones who had come with him from the third faction – the Sword Saint slaughtered thirteen Primas within a minute, alongside more than a thousand beasts. In Miyamoto's view, these were some of the weakest Primas he had seen, but his actions got the job enough and helped him move his strategy forward.

That display of power was enough for him to create the current situation that was now playing out as the Sword Saint stood before three Beastkin Kings and some of the most influential people from their factions... speaking to them like the ignorant children they had been acting as.

"The World Congress was established as a mechanism to force a planet to come together. It was a way to meet in a neutral space with no violence allowed, to talk out differences and unite, with this system event proving as the final test of the enlightened on a planet," the Sword Saint explained as he paced back and forth in front of the three kings.

"However, this event is only the beginning. Tell me, do the three of you have an inkling as to what is happening in the rest of the galaxy?" Miyamoto asked the three, and from their lack of response, they clearly didn't. "It's something that's also happening everywhere else across the universe, but this galaxy perhaps has it the worst. A war is going on far beyond the scope of your little conflict. Massive factions are fighting. Factions with power far beyond what this planet can handle. Factions that are more than interested in claiming a world, seemingly ripe for the taking because its leaders care more about fighting amongst themselves than addressing external threats."

It was clear the three of them already knew much of this, but it required repeating. Perhaps they had needed someone to set them straight for a long time, and the Sword Saint would have to be that person.

"What I say next is not to sow discord, but that you know is important. All three of you privately proposed to me that I could help slay the two others, and they would commit to a quite favorable alliance," he continued, the three of them throwing angry glances at one another but still shut up. "I

rejected them all... but others would gladly take such an offer. I also want you to consider something. What happens if a major faction comes from another planet, takes advantage of your struggle, and offers an alliance, effectively making you servants? Would you reject, or would the desperation from fighting a losing conflict push you to make an unwise choice? I believe that if the status quo is maintained, the answer is clear."

The room was silent as these words hung in the air, the presence of the Sword Saint making them unable to protest. One of them – the Second King – did speak up, though.

"Then what is your solution? Joining your faction?" he asked. A bold but very important question Miyamoto had naturally been expecting.

"I do not belong to any faction per-se, and the one I'm closest with does not care to integrate other forces," he shook his head. "But no matter the future, facing it with a united front will be for the best. Not just for at least two of you but the people you rule over. So stop this endless fighting. Finally, If you wish to send a delegation to my home planet, be my guest, but I shall not be the arbiter of this planet's future. That role and responsibility falls to the three of you."

The three Beastkin Kings had managed to obtain their statuses not only due to their personal power but also their respective prowess' as leaders. The Sword Saint wasn't keen on how they had handled things so far, but he believed them all competent enough to understand the importance of avoiding an internal conflict when there were so many external threats on the horizon.

"We... will need to discuss," the Third King said as he and the Second King looked at the fourth one. "But we will need to ensure fairness. There is only one World Leader spot, and that has already been claimed."

"And such cannot be changed, only accepted and moved past," the Sword Saint said, addressing the Fourth King directly. "Of course, your ability to do so depends on his ability to recognize that his position is not above the two of you. Clearly, you will need another leadership structure than your current one to ensure fairness, but I do not see myself having any role in making that happen. The only role I have yet to fulfill is that of a slayer of your Prima Guardian."

"If you feel certain you can handle this Guardian alone, I would gladly release it," the Fourth King said as he seemed to remember something and turned to the two other kings. "Assuming the two of you have no protests against me doing so."

Miyamoto smiled as the two other leaders had no complaints. With that sorted, there was no need to delay as the Sword Saint headed off together with all three Kings alongside their escorts. These people were some of the strongest on the planet by far, and yet they posed no danger to the Sword Saint at all.

In fact, he found the overall power level of this planet low. It was very obvious they would find themselves instantly dominated should another of the stronger planets in the Milky Way choose to invade them, and in truth, Miyamoto had no way of knowing if the alliance he had sought to create would actually help. He hoped it would; he genuinely did, and he believed that his final demonstration to the Kings would prove how powerless they truly were when compared to those toward the peak. Those like himself.

He watched the Fourth King enter the Prima Vessel and, not long after, sprint out again quite literally with his tail between his legs.

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The Sword Saint stood ready for the Prima Guardian to appear. The moment it did, Miyamoto used Identify.

[Distinguished Prima Guardian – lvl 294]

This was only the third Guardian he saw that didn't even reach the rank of Honored Prima Guardian. This Guardian looked like a centaur, except it had an upper body on both sides of the horse body, and quite frankly, it looked pretty bizarre.

The fear on the faces of the Kings was obvious as the Sword Saint bent his knees and prepared for his demonstration. They had seen some of his power once, planting the seed of knowledge that he was stronger than three of them... now he wanted them to truly realize how frightening the multiverse could be.

Right as the Prima Guardian saw Miyamoto, it charged, and the Sword Saint took a deep breath, exhaling as he spoke and drew his sword.

"Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut."

For a moment, the world was still. A faint line was drawn across reality before everything came crashing down, and blood filled the sky as the Prima Guardian was cut cleanly in two horizontally. Without even giving the creature a chance to rest, the Sword Saint stepped forward and attacked, swinging his blade two dozen times as the boss creature was sliced apart before it had the faintest chance to fight back, simply too weak to pose any danger.

You have slain [Distinguished Prima Guardian – lvl 294] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Stopping his attack, the Sword Saint breathed in once more, whipping the blood off his sword before he sheathed it. Without a single drop of blood on his robes, he turned to look at the three Kings who now stared at him with complex emotions, fear definitely in there, but more than that, he felt a sense of what Miyamoto could only classify as reverence.

"Thank you for allowing me to accomplish the task I came to do," the Sword Saint said with a smile and a nod. "Now, if you would accompany me into the Prima Vessel, I wish to see if I can use it to return to my planet. If not, the blueprint for a teleportation circle allowing not just you to teleport to other planets, but for other planets to travel here should have become available."

His words made the Kings exit their stupor as the World Leader and other Kings accompanied the Sword Saint into the Prima Vessel, wherein they quickly confirmed that the Sword Saint could use it to return to Earth, so that was fortunate. What should not have come as a surprise was the instant question from the Kings if they could send some people back to Earth with him, something Miyamoto naturally agreed to. Only three total, though. He wouldn't want to needlessly overwhelm Miranda, knowing she was already incredibly busy.

With three diplomats, the Sword Saint thus returned to Earth once more, having only needed a few days to handle this one. He was already looking forward to the next planet and exploring its culture. The only problem was that to get to the planet, he would likely need to use the monstrous creation that Arnold constructed to get there, something he most certainly wasn't looking forward to experiencing again.

Alas, sacrifices had to be made... and he couldn't exactly show the scientist it bothered him too much. The same as when he went to the amusement park when he was younger. No matter how bad those damn roller coasters made him feel, he never let his family see and would instead suffer in the bathroom once alone.

Anything else, his flawed pride simply wouldn't allow.

"Truly, your overcautiousness is wholly unnecessary," the nahoom shook his head with a dry smile. "You being aware of my Bloodline would already make it foolish for me to attempt to use it, and I'm not silly enough to risk ruining a valuable relationship."

"I believe trust is earned, not merely given, and so far, you have done nothing to make me willing to trust you," Jacob answered as he stood on the balcony, the Chosen of Yip of Yore leaning against the railing as they spoke.

"I made a promise with the Holy Church, something you are very aware of," Ell'Hakan pointed out. "Then again, you are this cautious around my Bloodline because you are with the Church, so I probably shouldn't complain."

"No, you really shouldn't," Jacob muttered, not exactly satisfied with the current situation. He had done what he could to stay safe, though.

Jacob, being aware of Ell'hakan and his Bloodline, had taken specific measures to ensure he wouldn't fall victim to it. The first one was, of course, to try and be in tune with his own emotions, trying to ask himself a lot of questions to make sure he was thinking clearly and not affected in any way. Of course, some influence could still sneak through, but that was what he had his ultimate defense for:

Bertram.

His Guardian wasn't anywhere close to Ell'Hakan and entirely out of his effective area. Due to their connection, Jacob could share his emotions with his old bodyguard, and while Jacob would perhaps not notice any changes, Bertram for sure would. Plus, having two people who were so connected would make it easy for them to point out if the other ever acted off, as long as they didn't meet up while in the presence of Ell'hakan and got affected at the same time.

"Your personal dislike of me isn't truly that warranted, is it?" Ell'Hakan asked. "When I went to your homeworld, the Holy Church more than happily took advantage and was even warned of my arrival beforehand. They condoned what I did. The overall losses your planet suffered during it all weren't significant either."

Jacob remained silent as Ell'Hakan kept speaking.

"Exactly how do you envision this going for the Holy Church if the Order of the Malefic Viper is allowed to run wild? The Church wants to control the galaxy, something I'm more than fine with, but will your old coworker agree with such a thing? Or will he put up a fight till the bitter end, killing countless in service of his own pride and stubbornness?"

"The Chosen of the Malefic Viper has yet to show any outright hostility toward other planets, unlike you. In fact, quite the opposite, as per a recording you personally machinated into existence. I have no cause to believe he will not simply continue to let sleeping dogs lie," Jacob argued back. "And, while the Holy Church would like control of the Milky Way... it is but one of countless galaxies. Ultimately meaningless in the grand scheme of things. What I'm trying to say is that I believe your current approach is misguided... fighting Jake or trying to control his future will lead to nothing but the end of your Path."

"Sadly, your belief does not seem to be shared by your superiors," Ell'Hakan said, shaking his head. "You know, I respect your loyalty to someone who was once a friend, and you may find this hard to believe, but you are genuinely the most pleasant person I believe I have ever met. I know you don't like me personally, yet there is no animosity. No truly negative emotions outside of ones wanting me to find a better Path. It's no wonder the Church and pretty much every other divine faction seem so keen on Augurs. It takes a very unique person to become one."

"If you see the value an Augur brings, then you should also heed their advice," Jacob said with a sigh. "You walk a complicated Path. A powerful one, yes, but it also holds a certain fragility. The foundation on which it is built is unstable, leaving vulnerabilities that may one day come back to haunt you. There are fateful lies that are bound to--"

"You know what?" Ell'Hakan said as he flared his aura and stared at Jacob. "I think I changed my mind about Augurs. You can sure be the annoying sort."

"I don't tell you what you want to hear, but what I feel like you need to hear. As for if you take my words to heart or not... that, I have no control over," Jacob kept talking. "You should also know from my emotions I truly do bear no ill will."

"Which only makes you all the more frustrating. Either way, just do the job you came here to do and direct the strike team where they are most needed," Ell'Hakan said as he walked off, but he stopped just

before he entered the building from the balcony. "If you truly want peace and to avoid needless conflict as you keep preaching, make the Chosen of the Malefic Viper make the right choice. Do so I no longer have to refer to him with that label at all. I will never be a friend of his, but his current Path requires one of us to die unless something significant changes."

"Then let us hope the future brings such changes," Jacob said with a sigh.

Ell'Hakan left with those words, and the Augur just kept staring out at the world from which they were organizing the efforts of the Prima Guardian Alliance. Jacob was using his skills to divine what planets needed help the most, but he was also there because of the partnership between Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church.

Jacob was the highest-ranked member of the Church in the Milky Way, after all. He was privy to many things, had seen many futures, possessed his own insights and theories, and had felt many Paths. Ell'Hakan wasn't wrong. He or Jake would end up with one of them dead as things were now. Jacob also knew of the nahoom's hopes, that Jake would end up with Valhal or at least no longer in direct conflict. He believed that would make them no longer have a need to be enemies...

Truly showing how he walked a Path of delusion if he believed that would make Jake not want to kill him.

As for what would happen if Yip of Yore managed to actually slay the Malefic Viper... such a future wasn't even one Jacob could begin to augur.

Nor was he convinced it would be worth doing even if he was capable of trying.

Chapter 977: A Good Faction & Developing Situation

"This definitely isn't looking good," Jake muttered as he stared at the projected map of the galaxy. A few weeks ago, Arnold had sent over a drone capable of copying the map within the Prima Vessel to allow Jake to keep track of everything happening, so he tried to check it out once in a while. So far, keeping track hadn't been the most uplifting of experiences.

"I do wonder what the response of the major factions shall be," Vesperia agreed, though she didn't look overly concerned. Likely because the few planets she cared about had already destroyed every teleportation circle they had, stopping anyone from going to or from the planet. The members of the

Endless Empire living there would then simply get in contact with the faction through their divine connection after the system event was over and work from there without having to interact with the rest of the event.

Jake could only see this as a good plan considering the development on the map. It had been over two months now since Jake had his unfortunate accident, and he was still healing... but while he was getting better, the galaxy was getting worse.

Over a dozen black flags had appeared, and the number of planets Jake could only assume got consumed by desolation was now up to twenty-one. A single entity had managed to destroy that many planets within only a couple of months, and Jake definitely didn't have a good feeling about it. Not just because someone or something capable of destroying planets wasn't the best to have in your local galaxy, but because of what this meant.

The creature was bound to be growing stronger with every passing day. It had to be getting quite a few levels, as the Records associated with its actions were far from insignificant... and in the meanwhile, what was Jake doing?

Well, not any leveling, that was for damn sure. One of the side effects of this kind of soul damage Jake hadn't even considered was the complete inability to gain any experience or levels at all while hurt. At least he wouldn't be able to gain any levels before he was fully healed.

Jake still needed to remain active, though, just as Eron had said. That was another way of saying that Jake had to keep doing stuff to keep gaining Records despite not really getting anything out of it besides his healing not slowing down. Jake's way of doing this had naturally been through his Puzzle Cube, which had served nicely, and it had led to his recovery doing pretty well, in his opinion.

Status

Mana Points (MP): 139,556/293,099 (442,484)

Jake's mana pool was nearly up by a hundred thousand now, and according to the last time he spoke with Eron, he should be healed within a few more months. Even the healer couldn't fully say anything with confidence, though, as this kind of recovery was far from linear, and every soul healed differently

than others. Eron did comment that Jake was healing a lot more rapidly than first expected, which was a nice surprise.

The healer theorized this was potentially due to Jake's arcane affinity and its innate concept of stability, and seeing as his affinity was born of his Bloodline, it certainly was also a cause if Eron was right. However, despite his Bloodline being awesome, it still wasn't omnipotent and he was still on what was effectively house arrest for now.

All while the galaxy was facing a living calamity leaving desolate planets in its wake.

"None of the planets Miranda is in contact with have been hit, right?" Jake asked with furrowed brows.

"Not as far as I've heard," Vesperia shook her head. "No one is even sure how this creature travels around. Obviously, it's making use of the teleportation network, but would anyone truly be foolish enough to accept this entity that has killed so many planets before? The only reason this could realistically happen was with planets not in active contact with any other planet who've killed their Prima Guardian yet... or an ally of an ally who has... which is a rapidly waning number if such even exist anymore."

"Exactly," Jake said, still confused. He couldn't help but look down at his ring and wonder if it was the reason "I" could travel around, assuming this creature also had such a ring. No other explanation seemed probable to allow it access to the teleporters. Was there a function he hadn't unlocked? One he hadn't appropriately explored?

Staring at the map, he saw that nearly all the blue planets part of the alliance had now turned green, with not even a hundred left. Kindroth and Miranda had been busy sending teams to help out everywhere as the system event only got easier and easier, and Jake had heard that quite a big alliance had been formed by now.

However, compared to the alliance made by Ell'Hakan, it was far smaller. In fact, they had even lost a few of the planets that had been seen as loyal to Earth, the World Leaders and population choosing to rather side with Ell'Hakan.

The reason they had done this was an annoying one because Jake couldn't really argue against it. They had all come to learn that Ell'Hakan wasn't just expanding to make his own personal alliance bigger but had instead found a working partner in the Holy Church, effectively handing over planets to them and allowing them to assimilate their populations.

As the single-largest faction in the entire multiverse, it wasn't surprising they already had a lot of planets in the Milky Way under their control even before the system event began. These highly organized planets had helped become the backbone of Ell'Hakan's campaign and fortified his position as the leader of the alliance. What's more, they offered something no one else could, which was also the reason why the Holy Church had become the largest faction in the multiverse in the first place: safety.

A far more reassuring kind of safety than any other faction in the entire multiverse could offer.

To these planets, many of which had been filled with conflict ever since the system arrived, this was a great opportunity. Joining the Holy Church meant that not only would you get the backing of the biggest faction, but it was also pretty universally agreed that for the common person, the Church was the best faction to be a part of. What other faction could offer a life after death? For people who had risked their lives every day to suddenly be presented with a faction that promised such a thing... yeah, the appeal was understandable.

Not to say they even necessarily had to all die. The Holy Church ran on faith and still preferred living believers. They had a very solid track record of evacuating people from planets facing danger, Earth being a good example, as they invested a lot of resources to bring members of the Church away once they deemed it unwise to stay. All in all, it wasn't hard to see why many planets chose to side with the Church.

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Ell'Hakan had made a good choice to ally with them. Chances are they had a deal that was also very beneficial to Ell'Hakan, allowing him to grow his own power in tandem with the Church. Jake already knew from all the Nevermore stuff he had a deal of some kind... he just really hoped the Holy Church would know when a rabid dog had to be put down.

As for a war with the Holy Church... Jake would want to avoid it if possible, as he really didn't see any value in having one, something he highly suspected Ell'Hakan already knew. All it would do was force him to kill a lot of people he had no interest in killing in the first place from a faction that had many bad elements for sure but ultimately wasn't even worse than all the others. Many would even argue it was the faction doing the most good in the multiverse.

This was another good reason for World Leaders to join the Church. Not many dared outright attack them, as they were, again, the largest in the multiverse, and they had a reputation for retaliating quite harshly.

Jake could admit that something like the Holy Church or Holyland – which really was their big selling point - didn't appeal to him personally, but if Villy came to Jake and offered that his parents could get the same deal members of the Holy Church got, he wouldn't say no. What son would say no to his parents being offered a life after death? It was selfish and hypocritical that he wanted them to be safe despite risking himself so much, but he'd never claimed he wasn't a bit hypocritical.

Vesperia also had her own opinion on the topic of why so many of the enlightened joined the Holy Church with such enthusiasm:

"Humans and those like you are inherently selfish creatures. Your kind cares about their own survival more than anything else, with individualism and egoism trumping what's best for the collective. Only when survival is no longer something that is actively thought about do you become able to look at the bigger picture," Vesperia said with a sigh before quickly clarifying further. "Of course, I do not mean that individualism is always bad; I just believe it shouldn't be a universal concept. The average human I see swarming your planet has no value and adds nothing, so what right do they have to display such egoism? The multiverse is not equal, and some entities are inherently more valuable than others. They should accept this fact and they should prioritize raising up those of value rather than be selfish, even if doing so meant giving away their own lives."

"You know, that is kind of how the Holy Church works," Jake pointed out with a smile. "Are the Endless Empire and Church really that much different in that aspect? Both like to throw armies of weaklings at others rather than send out their elites."

Vesperia scoffed and shook her head. "I find the comparison ridiculous. Drones die for the hive. All are willing to die for the hive if that's what's required to ensure its survival. That is their purpose. Members of the Holy Church do not die because it's their duty. They only give their lives in the first place because they know that is not their true end, making it not a true sacrifice either. It's ridiculous that they need it, but without the Holyland, the entire Holy Church would not be able to function as it is. Also, there is a good reason those who give their lives are hailed as martyrs and heroes after their deaths, despite how meaningless their sacrifices ultimately are. It all comes back to ego... an innate desire to be praised and recognized despite insignificant contributions. They see others hailed and believe that dying such a "noble" death would be worth it, with the only real consequence relaxation for the rest of their soul's lifespan."

Jake saw no reason to argue, he did find her words a bit funny, though. "Does that mean you don't want praise or recognition as often?"

"... I didn't say that. I said it needs to be earned," Vesperia said, looking away. "And I contribute a lot..."

Shaking his head, Jake couldn't help but smile. "To me, you being you is more than enough to earn a bit of praise."

Vesperia smiled at his words as the two of them kept looking at the star map a bit longer side by side. Jake hated being unable to affect it, but he truly didn't have a choice. All he could do was trust Miranda, the Sword Saint, and all the others.

Speaking of the Sword Saint, he had been very busy with Arnold's teleporter. He was incredibly efficient, visiting world after world and some-fucking-how ending up without much conflict. Nearly every time he returned, he even brought back diplomats who were definitely far more loyal than those part of the Prima Guardian Alliance from the get-go.

The one time Jake spoke to the old man, he had complained about the teleporter made by Arnold, something Jake could only empathize with. From the sounds of it, Arnold hadn't prioritized making the experience smoother either but had focused on other aspects he believed were more important to improve.

Sylphie and the Fallen King had also started using Arnold's teleporter together to help other planets, though their success rate for peaceful negotiation was quite a bit lower than the Sword Saint's. As in, nearly every single time they went to a planet to help it, they ended up having to kill a lot of people before finally getting to fight the Prima Guardian and leaving. For some reason, people were super distrusting of two monsters offering help in the middle of a system event all about deciding if monsters or enlightened would ultimately claim dominion over a planet.

There was even one instance Miranda reported about where they ended up siding with the monsters. After killing the Prima Guardian, the beasts on the planet all kept attacking the native enlightened race. It turns out they had been royal assholes, and when they, in their crazy delusion, demanded the Fallen King and Sylphie to enslave themselves to the superior natives, it didn't end well for them.

Man... Jake was looking forward to when he could be the one creating chaos again. Speaking of someone capable of also ravaging a bit themselves:

"By the way, how is the recovery of your Queen's Guards going? You said it was pretty much done last time?" Jake asked the True Royal.

"Indeed, they are all fully reborn but are still growing in power. Shouldn't be long before--"

Her words were interrupted as the landline phone down in the lab started ringing, catching their attention. Jake frowned, as usually he was the one reaching out, or they had planned meetings, so for them to call him...

Jake hurried over and picked it up, Vesperia also listening in intently as Miranda spoke on the other end.

"I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time, but we just received two pieces of news that I believed pertinent to share with you immediately," Miranda said in a serious tone.

"Shoot, and Vesperia is also here," Jake answered quickly.

"Alright... first of all, it has been confirmed that Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church have also created a method to teleport people to other planets in the galaxy, akin to Arnold's creation. We are not yet clear on all the details of if this device is capable of also teleporting here to Earth, but a safe assumption is that it can," Miranda said, making Jake frown.

They knew this had to happen at some point. In fact, it was proof of just how damn smart Arnold was that he beat an entire faction by several months nearly entirely on his own. Still, this wasn't good news and certainly complicated things.

"Well, that sure sucks. What's the second piece of news?" Jake asked, not beating around the bush.

"Reports that Ell'Hakan seems to be aware you haven't been on the move recently, and we believe he may soon try something... as for what that something entails, we have no idea as of now, but it sounded

ominous,” Miranda said. “I don’t think he will directly attack Earth again, but... anyone currently fighting out there are potential targets.”

Jake sighed, wondering if the Chosen would really try and go after any of Jake’s allies... and the answer was that he definitely did seem like the kind who would. Jake just wasn’t sure how that would fit into his story... and if he did do something, what could Jake really do in his current state that wasn’t stupidly risky? The more time passed, and the more updates Jake got, the more annoying his situation just kept getting, as he really picked a bad time to be a moron.

Man... fuck this soul damage.

Chapter 978: Unsettling Whispers

“Assistance is not offered; it’s provided whether you want it or not. Your thoughts on the matter and your opinions are only factors that will lead to needless complications. So stand down and retain your lives,” the Fallen King said, frankly tired of dealing with all these so-called “enlightened” that kept creating problems whenever he and the Sylphian Hawk merely wanted to provide assistance in killing the Prima Guardian.

The Fallen King was currently floating in front of a party led by the World Leader of this particular planet. Around fifty of their “elites” were scattered all around him, knocked out with weak soul attacks, having utterly failed to put up any fight worth mentioning. The hawk hadn’t even needed to do anything but had instead decided to clear out every Prima in the vicinity of the Prima Vessel ahead of time.

“Replacing one calamity with another is not assistance,” the human woman who wielded the title of World Leader answered.

“Consider your options. Join me in freeing the Prima Guardian and trust us to slay it before leaving you in peace or oppose our will and know with certainty you face two entities more dangerous than the Guardian,” the Fallen King said in a harsh and very threatening tone.

“If... if you kill me, you have no way to free the Guardian,” the World Leader said, trying to look brave. Her belief that her words were true was what gave her any kind of courage to argue and stand up to the Unique Lifeform. She believed the King needed her...

"You do not know, do you?" the Fallen King said. "When the World Leader and a sufficient percentage of the enlightened population are all slain, the Prima Guardian will automatically be released. Perhaps designed as a kind of mercy-killing by the system? I do not know. All I know is that your continued existence is an act of mercy on my part, and you are testing the boundaries of my benevolence."

To clarify, the Fallen King had no idea if what he said was true. What he did know was that negotiating as a monster was overly tiring, as enlightened simply never trusted him, at least not those in a newly integrated universe. There were naturally some exceptions and even a planet with beastfolk where Sylphie easily convinced them as they worshipped her almost like a deity due to the power of her variant race.

For this particular planet, the Fallen King had quickly gotten the understanding that they would not volunteer any help... so he had chosen the forceful approach. From the looks of how the World Leader wavered and the signs of telepathic communication between the party, it appeared to be working, as not long after, the human woman gritted her teeth.

"Fine... but swear upon your honor as a Unique Lifeform that you are not deceiving us," she said, quite cleverly if the Fallen King had to say so.

"I will swear that my companion and I are only here with the objective of slaying the Prima Guardian and will leave afterward without killing any of your kin," the Fallen King answered truthfully.

Perhaps most would write off something as feeble as a promise, but this woman did seem to have a basic grasp of what a Unique Lifeform was. They were all prideful and wouldn't do something like swearing upon their honor just to trick someone so much weaker than themselves. The Fallen King wouldn't do so either. Such things were simply beneath him, and she knew it.

"Alright... alright, we'll trust you," the World Leader finally fully agreed, a bit too slowly in the opinion of the King, but quickly enough that this wouldn't cause a needless delay.

"Then let us delay no longer," the King said, and with the World Leader and her party of weaklings in tow, headed toward the Prima Vessel to free and kill yet another Prima Guardian.

Once they arrived, Sylphie was already done cleaning up anything close to it and just waiting for them to get there. They had to fly a good deal of the way due to how weak this planet was and how they hadn't even managed to get any kind of teleporter within three hours of travel time to the Vessel.

Having the World Leader enter the Prima Vessel went as always. She got in, they all waited a few minutes, and then she quickly flew out, a Prima Guardian hot on her heels. It was yet another weak one, and without the Fallen King having to do much, an excited Sylphie tore it apart, the Fallen King only doing a little to speed things up.

At this point, this all just felt like busy work. They had cleared about thirty planets this way, and it had been more than four months since the hunter decided to temporarily cripple himself due to his own stupidity, causing immense soul damage to himself. Even the King had taken some residual damage he needed to heal, and the entire experience had only made it clear he needed to work on separating himself from Jake.

Anyway, the opponents they faced at this point were all too weak to really bother with. The Guardians didn't even have the Honored tag anymore, and if the Fallen King hadn't seen how utterly useless the native populations were, he would have questioned how any planet could lose to this system event.

With the Guardian dead, Sylphie returned to the King and the cowering World Leader as they prepared for the final part.

"Will you hold true to your promise?" the World Leader asked, looking at the Vessel. The King also noticed the woman's party had already taken off during the fighting but didn't really care.

"Naturally. Now come, activate the Vessel, and we shall take our leave," the Fallen King said. With Sylphie resting on the King's shoulder, they entered the Prima Vessel with the usual design. A long hallway with a crossroad at the end, one leading into the control room, another into the teleportation room, and the final one with the rewards once all regular Primas were slain.

All were locked and needed the World Leader to unlock them, which was why they had to keep the annoying weaklings alive and somewhat healthy.

They first went to the control room, and the World Leader unlocked the barrier to enter and touched the metal orb that activated the Vessel. With it, the map also appeared as the World Leader stared at it with wide eyes.

"This is... wow," she muttered, staring at the map. "So many planets cleared, so many lives saved... did you two help do that?"

The Fallen King found her shift in mood a bit odd but didn't comment further. "Some. Once the entire galaxy is clear of Prima Guardians, the event shall conclude, and that is what we are working toward."

This text was taken from Royal Road. Help the author by reading the original version there.

"I see," the World Leader said with a nod and a smile.

"Now, let us fulfill our promise and leave. Oh, and allow me to offer some free advice. Now that you are considered part of the Prima Guardian Alliance, you can also have people teleport to or from here to help you clean up the remaining regular Primas. Of course, you will need to establish the teleportation circle that should have been provided to you when you unlocked the Prima Vessel,"

the Fallen King said, deciding to be a bit helpful, as the witch back in Haven had many times told him to at least not make other World Leaders too fearful.

The woman looked at him and kept smiling. "Hm, and to use this new teleporter that just became available, you needed to have claimed the Prima Vessel first, even if you had constructed one with knowledge provided by another planet beforehand. Assuming you hadn't joined the Alliance during the World Congress."

One didn't need Jake's intuition to know something was off as the Fallen King stared at the World Leader. "You seem oddly informed for--"

"Thank you for allowing me to realize my fate."

Without any warning, the Fallen King was pushed back by an explosion and was covered in blood as the World Leader blew herself up, the Unique Lifeform just floating there undamaged, uncertain of what had just happened.

"Ree?" Sylphie, who had not been hit by the blood or explosion at all, asked.

“Nothing good,” the Fallen King responded, quickly floating out into the hallway and seeing the barrier still blocking the entrance to the teleportation room and their way home... now with no World Leader available to unlock it. “Nothing good at all.”

Jake was not to be disturbed while recovering and had primarily been left alone with Vesperia as he spent most of his days working with the Puzzle Box of the Seeker, the nifty mana-practice toy allowing him to put his mind off things while even improving a bit and helping speed up his recovery. He truly did try to make the best of this forced downtime.

However, that day, things felt off. Something wasn't right, and Jake had informed Miranda of it immediately, as it was so bad Jake couldn't even properly focus on things. As the hours passed, the feeling of wrongness only grew, and Jake couldn't place his finger on what exactly was wrong.

Miranda quickly came back and had a hard time seeing where the issue could be. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Everything was standard as it had been for the last many months. Still, Jake couldn't shake it and had even checked in with Sylphie real quick with their Union Oath contract and gotten back a feeling of her being bored, likely waiting for the Fallen King to do King stuff and negotiating, something the hawk wasn't very good at as most World Leaders didn't speak Sylphie.

He kept trying – and failing – to properly distract himself, even after he had Miranda check up on everyone he knew and cared about. Jake even began to fear something was happening or was going to happen to someone he couldn't even get in contact with. Had what Villy did for Jake hurt him more badly than he let on? Was it someone else back in the Order who was in trouble?

Sometimes, he hated the inconsistency of his intuition. There were times it was very clear, while in other instances, it just gave him super vague feelings. On this day, all it told him was that something was wrong and that someone could potentially be in danger...

As the day progressed, Jake could only wait, hoping for this feeling to fade with time. It didn't, but it only kept growing worse and worse until finally, Jake got word from Miranda.

“William and I are coming over. I know you don't like him, but he was our best bet for finding out what was wrong... and he did find something suspicious enough that we need to meet,” she sent, Jake practically at the edge of his seat as the message arrived.

For Miranda to bring William over, this had to be very serious. The karmic mage hadn't been one of the people who knew Jake was still suffering from a semi-permanent soul injury, and he was pretty much bound to find out if he met Jake in person. Still, Jake didn't have time to worry about this, as he waited the five minutes it took for them to get there.

When they arrived, they brought a third person along. One that didn't look like he wanted to be there, based on how half his body had turned into metal, and he was even tied up with a glowing sigil left by Miranda on his forehead, seemingly suppressing his energies. He was also unconscious, but Jake saw the grave looks on Miranda and William's faces.

"What's going on?" Jake asked, looking at the tied-up guy. "Who's that?"

"I halfway hoped you'd know," William said, not even commenting on Jake's current state. "He harbored intense hatred for you."

Miranda chose to step in to elaborate as she motioned toward him. "We fully expected some spies to slip in over the last few months and naturally kept anyone new to the planet under observation in case they did something overly suspicious. I had William check out any people who I believed may have done something over the last day or so, specifically focusing on those who had communicated with anyone off-planet... and he found this guy, along with three other diplomats who killed themselves before we had a chance to stop them."

Jake kept quiet as William took over.

"All of them were wearing items that had to have been at least high ancient rarity or even legendary rarity, capable of hiding their own karmic bonds quite well. Only when I was right in front of them could I see what was wrong and unravel the net. I used some of my less-than-pleasant abilities to get close and try to figure out what they were doing, and all I learned is that they want to give you a fate worse than death," William sighed.

"That isn't anything new, is it?" Jake questioned. A lot of people wanted him dead, right? Ell'Hakan and all his goons, other minor gods he had potentially pissed off in the early days of the integration, and probably a lot he didn't even know about, including those who held some kind of resentment toward the Viper, his abilities to manipulate Primeval Origins, or just those envious of his Nevermore placement. So many damn suspects.

“Yes... but this guy was in communication with another planet not long ago,” William said in a serious tone. “One that hadn’t even been part of the Prima Guardian Alliance... and the one I also feel the presence of the Sylphian Hawk and Fallen King on.”

“Why woul-“

Just then, Jake also got a message from Sylphie, simply letting him know that they were trapped and needed help getting home... at which point Jake became certain, and his intuition had all feelings of vagueness leave it.

“They’re in danger,” Jake said with wide eyes, and William also seemed distressed as he got a message of his own.

“Remember the karmic tracker we spoke about implementing in the teleporter?” he asked, and before even elaborating, Jake knew as he clenched his fists.

--

The Fallen King floated in the sky outside the Prima Vessel, Sylphie next to him. They had tried to enter the teleportation chamber and failed, with their best theory now that should they kill every Prima on the planet, there was a good chance it would unlock. If not, they would have to wait for the scientist from back on Earth to send someone capable of teleporting back with them. Or, at the very least, someone who could open the gate, which they had discovered any World Leader who had successfully completed their planet’s own Prima event could.

This should be a mere annoyance, only slowing down their hunt of Guardians by a few days. Sylphie had also already sent a message to Jake through their Union Oath contract, only communicating that they needed extraction.

However, the message she got back was one of warning, and as they floated there, it became clear this was more than a mere annoyance. The Fallen King looked at the Sylphian Hawk and back to the horizon as he spoke.

“You feel it, too?”

“Ree...” the hawk gave off a small screech.

Something unsettling was coming. The Fallen King focused on improving his ability to view into the distance, which was when he saw it. Something was happening with the energy in the horizon. It was being disturbed somehow, and as the King threw a questioning mental probe at the hawk with actual eyes and way better vision, her answer was only more unsettling.

She saw a horizon slowly being drained of color and said the wind had nearly stopped blowing from that direction entirely... what faint whispers that did reach her speaking only of desolation.

Chapter 979: A Perplexing Creature

All was quiet as the Fallen King and Sylphie watched the lone figure approach in the distance at a slow but steady speed. With it, all colors faded, and the land died, never to have anything grow on it again. As the entity grew closer, the Fallen King finally saw the creature properly as it went over a small hill.

It was only a little taller than the average human and was utterly emaciated, looking almost like a skeleton with skin attached in several places. It was impossible to know if it was male, female, or anything in between, nor if it had ever even been a true living being in the first place. Looking at it did make the Fallen King think of the undead, except there was no death energy anywhere to be seen... and even the undead would die when exposed to desolation.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, now incredibly serious. The aura that blanketed the horizon was unsettling and powerful, yet also somehow hollow. It felt like it shouldn’t be able to exist, and yet it did. She felt it as well as he did,

“That remains yet undecided,” the Fallen King said, unable to determine how this encounter would play out. Perhaps it was because of the nature of the creature, but he didn’t feel any hostility from the creature. On the other hand, he fully expected it to be an enemy.

By now, it was pretty damn clear this was some kind of setup. As for who was behind it, the Fallen King had no way of knowing, though he had his suspects, and all he knew was that the situation was incredibly perilous. When he used Identify on the creature, it only made things worse.

[Desolate Child of Loss – lvi 306]

Its level was higher than expected and put pressure on the Fallen King, especially because he couldn't get a full reading on just how powerful this foe was. Sylphie had also identified the approaching creature and was ready to act at a moment's notice, showing the same level of uncertainty.

The creature known as the Desolate Child of Loss had also spotted them floating in front of the Prima Vessel. It continued to walk forward, its aura spreading with every footfall as the already torn-up plains surrounding the Vessel were drained of all light and life.

Many theories had been made about what kind of creature they were dealing with, and the Fallen King had even suspected it could be a Unique Lifeform. It was confirmed it wasn't now, as the King would have felt it if it was, which made the second possibility far more probable: it was a living calamity. A creature without any intelligence but only an instinct to carry out its innate will, this one seemingly striving to turn the entire world desolate.

As the creature got closer, the Fallen King was ready to strike as words would only be a waste of time... as he was proven entirely wrong, and the Desolate Child of Loss not only stopped approaching but proved itself capable of communication.

"You strong. Both of you... but no Guardian?" a voice echoed in a whispering voice as the creature opened its mouth and spoke, its very words sending out waves of desolation. It was two short sentences if you could even call them that, but enough proof it wasn't some dumb monster. This complicated things and made the King suspect that this was perhaps not this creature being manipulated and used as a weapon. Instead, it was the perpetrator or at least willingly working with them.

"You speak as if you did not know we would be here. That you were not called here specifically to deal with us," the Fallen King infused his telepathic message with energy, partly to reach the Desolate Child of Loss in the distance and partly to exude power.

"I called, they answered, now I'm here," the creature simply said, proving that even if it could speak, it wasn't in a highly complex fashion. "I only see you now."

The theory that this Desolate Child of Loss had been the schemer behind this all and wasn't just being used became less and less probable. Which only led to more problems, but also possibilities. Because if it wasn't here explicitly to fight them...

"If we only see each other now, then you are being used. Exploited. We do not wish to be your enemy,"

the Fallen King said. Even if they had to one day fight this creature, now wasn't a good time.

"Enemy? No... why enemy?" the Desolate Child of Loss asked, seemingly confused. "I... am not enemy."

A somewhat comforting answer if the Fallen King said so himself, and he kept trying to press on as this creature seemed rather willing to communicate. "I cannot confirm it, but the one who used you is likely someone named Ell'Hakan. He may have called himself other things, like the Celestial Child or Chosen of Yip of Yore, and he is your true enemy if he is indeed behind this."

The Desolate Child of Loss tilted its head at the King's words and responded. "No. How could? I am... I."

It was an answer that made no sense, making the Fallen King try again. "Have you met him? Ell'Hakan?"

"No... yes... always... never..." the creature kept speaking in tongues. "I meet you now. But not same."

Things weren't really progressing, and as the Fallen King saw the desolation continue to spread all around the Desolate Child of Loss, he believed it was time to wrap this up. For a very brief second, the King even considered asking this creature to help them teleport home, as it clearly had a way to access and use the Vessels, but decided against that as he didn't want to risk more than he had to. Seeing as this planet had a single small moon... yeah, hiding out there for now was better.

Communicating his thoughts to Sylphie, the bird was surprisingly receptive to the idea, and the Fallen King prepared for them to make their exit.

"We do not wish to disturb your Path. Continue on, and we shall take our leave, not getting in your way," the Unique Lifeform said, trying to be as polite as possible to not get into a fight.

"But... why? I... am no enemy," the Desolate Child of Loss asked, sounding... hurt? Was it sad they were leaving?

“We are not your enemies, no, and you are not ours either, so let us part now on good terms and meet again in the future,”

the Fallen King said, trying to find a way to sound sympathetic while also still insisting on leaving.

“Stay... better,” the creature said as it, for the first time since it stopped, took a step forward. “I help you.”

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Sylphie instantly warned the King, and the Unique Lifeform knew but still tried to avoid a fight. “We are not enemies. We do not need to battle. Let us leave.”

“No battle... only help,” the Desolate Child of Loss said, looking up at them with its blank, entirely white pupils. “I return you home. Save you.”

The Fallen King had a solid feeling their definitions of home had minimal overlap and began to back up, speaking no matter how inevitable this situation felt. “We return home ourselves. We need no help.”

For a second, the Desolate Child of Loss seemed perplexed as it stopped, stared, and tilted its head. “I help. You be saved, go home, no choice. Better.”

Raising its foot, the creature took another step forward, and with it, a wave of desolation was pushed forward like a poisonous cloud seeking to eradicate everything. The Fallen King and Sylphie reacted in tandem as they retreated and exploded with power to create a buffer between themselves and the spreading desolation.

They hadn’t planned on fighting this Desolate Child of Loss... but that didn’t mean they weren’t willing to fight if it came down to it. Even if they were out-leveled and dealt with a powerful unknown enemy, they were still pinnacle creatures of the multiverse. No one had ever said this was a fight they couldn’t win, just that there was little to be gained from having it now while knowing nothing of what they were dealing with.

The Desolate Child of Loss kept simply walking forward, not in the mood to speak anymore as it gradually sped up. The Fallen King was confused as to how until he noticed... the very concept of space

was breaking down in front of the creature. It wasn't getting faster; what stopped it from going fast was simply disappearing.

Sylphie had already made good distance, being the faster of the two by far. Desolation washed over the Fallen King as he was floating in the air, his barrier slowly being eroded by the energies. The Desolate Child of Loss looked toward the Fallen King and stepped down one more time, disappearing entirely.

It appeared right in front of the Fallen King and merely swept its hand upwards, a torrent of desolation blasting into the Fallen King and making his barrier fade away for a moment before it was quickly re-established.

Counterattacking, the Unique Lifeform raised his ivory clawed hand and released a blast of force into the Desolate Child of Loss, the creature stumbling back as the Fallen King noted that the vast majority of his attack was turned desolate before it even had a chance to hit his opponent.

A blast of wind also descended from above, with most of it once more disappearing before it struck the creature of desolation and sent it flying down toward the ground. It stopped before fully landing and stared up at them, looking genuinely confused.

"This... okay. Just rest. Go home. Ascend."

The Fallen King wanted to answer but didn't get the chance as the creature shot upwards straight at him, more energy than before revolving around it. The only colors that could be seen were the faint golden energy embedded in the King's barrier, but when it met the charging Desolate Child of Loss, it faded entirely, and the Fallen King could only try to blast his opponent away again.

A shockwave of force blasted out of the Fallen King but was entirely canceled out by the energy of desolation as the creature put a hand on the Unique Lifeform.

Instantly, the Fallen King knew the danger.

His body exploded as his boosting skill fully activated, the monochrome temporarily pushed away by a golden wave as he unleashed his power. Raising both hands, a golden beam was released, striking the

Desolate Child of Loss head-on and blasting it into the distance as the King lowered his hands and assessed the damage.

A section of his chest had turned entirely gray and desolate from just a moment's touch, and while the energy that invaded the Unique Lifeform's body was now gone, the concept still lingered. If the Desolate Child of Loss had somehow gotten hold of the Fallen King for longer... that wouldn't have been good.

In the distance, the creature rose from the small crater it had been pushed into, with only a few scratches on its body. Right as it rose, a green figure struck down from above, the green line of color striking the Desolate Child of Loss head-on. From the top of its head to its crotch, a cut was formed, making the creature stumble backward as its flesh opened up and its mouth opened, the jaw in two parts straight down the middle.

Yet, despite this tremendous damage, it was Sylphie who screeched out in pain. The newly opened wounds on the creature of desolation spewed out gray energy like a torrent, and Sylphie, who had struck with her wing, hit the ground hard, forming a crater as her entire right wing had turned gray and dead. Forced to act fast, Sylphie cut off her own wing before quickly flying away, not ever daring to enter her wind form while anywhere close to the Desolate Child of Loss.

"Do not touch the creature directly, ever," the Fallen King warned the hawk as he prepared another blast to allow Sylphie her escape. She managed to get away without the Desolate Child of Loss doing anything to give chase as it just stood there, oozing out desolation from its wounds.

The blast released by the King struck the creature but barely affected it as the waves of desolation nullified the energy. Still, it stumbled back, and raising its hands, the Desolate Child of Loss forced the split flesh closed again as its thin flesh remerged once more.

"You fight. Should not."

Raising a hand toward the sky, the Desolate Child shot a gray beam of light upwards that exploded after reaching the clouds, making said clouds disappear as a giant dome of pure desolation descended upon the King and Sylphie.

Throughout the fight, the field of monochrome had only been spreading and getting more intense, with that process now further sped up. The very presence of the creature resulted in a powerful domain that meant the longer this dragged out, the worse the situation would get.

They did have one big advantage, though.

“Hold nothing back and attack with full power; I shall do the same. Test the limits of its durability and finish this before the creature grows too strong or learns how to dodge and fight properly,” the King quickly sent to Sylphie, getting a quick mental confirmation as the bird got ready to attack again.

In the limited time they had battled this creature, one thing had become very clear: it had no idea how to fight. It didn’t even seem to have any kind of survival instinct or danger sense at all based on how it failed to react when it was struck. One could believe this was because their attacks did no damage, but the Fallen King clearly saw that what they did had an effect. Especially that powerful strike landed by Sylphie. Did it do a lot of damage? No, but it did take some, and most creatures would at least try to avoid or minimize that damage. Not the Desolate Child of Loss, though, and that was something they should exploit.

Because while it had no idea how to fight, the Fallen King and Sylphie had spent decades together in Nevermore.

Holding out an arm to each side, the Fallen King condensed two large golden hammers on chains as Sylphie flanked the Desolate Child of Loss, having activated what she called her Green Shield, which seemed to hold up remarkably well against the desolation.

Going on the offensive, the King flew toward the creature, who responded in kind. It raised a hand and released a torrent of desolation that the Fallen King quickly dodged by telekinetically moving himself out of the way before swinging the hammer into the side of his opponent.

At the same time, a condensed bullet of wind struck the Desolate Child of Loss in its side, poking a small hole and giving the King yet another opening as his second hammer smashed the creature on the side of the head, making it spin through the air.

Attacking again, the King landed two more hits before the hammers became too fragile, and he had to reform them. Sylphie also didn't let up, most of her attacks striking from behind, tearing up the creature's body with blow after blow.

Yet with every attack they landed, the desolation in their surroundings only intensified, and eventually, the Fallen King and Sylphie were forced to retreat away from the Desolate Child of Loss as the strain got too bad. It was as if the creature was a bag of poison gas with a bit of it released every time they struck it, but luckily, this domain didn't seem to follow the creature as it quickly gave chase.

"This battle will not be short... let us hit and run while attempting to stay out of the epicenter of its domain as much as possible," the King said. Sylphie agreed though the Unique Lifeform felt her uncertainty. Understandably so... because despite all they had done to the creature, it looked barely affected by anything but just kept coming at them, seemingly with no sense of self-preservation at all.

Chapter 980: Durability Test

Back on Earth at Jake's lodge, more information came in from both William and Arnold, with Sylphie also sending a bit, which only made Jake more and more determined.

"I told you I'm going," Jake said in a harsh tone, refusing to hear otherwise as he prepared to storm out of his lodge and straight to Arnold's teleporter to take him to the planet where the Fallen King and Sylphie currently were in the midst of fighting.

"No, you are not," Miranda said in an even harsher tone as she stepped in front of Jake, blocking the door.

"Yes, I fucking am," Jake said, clenched his fists. "We have no idea what's truly going on over there, and I'll--"

"That's exactly why you're not going," Miranda interrupted Jake, looking him straight in the eyes. "Take just one moment to actually think for once. We have no information. All we know is that there is some kind of plot that trapped the two of them on the planet, and now, apparently, this "I" creature is there... an entity we know is incredibly dangerous due to your own testimony. And you want to just head there like a headless chicken?"

Jake wanted to defend himself, but Vesperia quickly also spoke up. "I concur with the verdant witch. This is obviously a trap, and that is clear to all. Moreover, it's difficult to believe it's coincidental this happened while you are still injured."

"What she said," Miranda jumped in again. "Even if we assume they didn't know you were injured, that just makes it all worse. They are clearly aware we can teleport to other planets, which can only mean they expected some kind of support to arrive. If you show up injured while they expect you at all power... do I need to say more?"

William, who really wasn't part of the conversation, stood uncomfortably in the corner, though from the look on his face, he clearly also thought heading to help the Fallen King and Sylphie would be questionable.

Still...

"I don't need to go alone," Jake insisted. "Even if the Sword Saint isn't here to help... if Arnold, Vesperia, Eron, and Sandy all come with me, I'm sure that we could handle anything they have to throw at us."

"In the current moment of time, we are sure of nothing," Vesperia sighed. "I also wish to go and assist them, but the risk is simply too high. If they are in a situation where the two of them can't escape, all of us going there will do is put more lives at risk... more accurately, the lives of those among us who are not skilled at escape. I simply cannot take such a risk as a True Royal and the last of my line... nor can I in good conscious agree you go as my Sire."

"To add... I don't think you can convince Arnold to go even if you tried... but we could look into Sandy going alone, as they should be able to get away, though everything is always risky when it comes to the concept of desolation," Miranda said, deep in thought.

Jake really didn't like the thought of just sending someone and not going with them. Especially when they were dealing with something like desolation. No matter what, though... they needed to act fast if they wanted to offer any kind of assistance whatsoever.

"Alright," Jake said, looking serious. "Here's the plan. I go together with Sandy and Eron inside of Sandy's stomach to not expose myself. Our goal is only extraction, not fighting, and if things get too dangerous, I know Sandy has a way to survive... but I doubt even a peak C-grade would be able to stop Sandy if Sandy really wanted to run. If all else fails, I still have one more hidden card to play."

Miranda and Vesperia didn't look happy with what Jake said, but he wasn't the kind of person who could just sit still and do nothing while Sylphie and the Fallen King were under attack.

Seeing how determined Jake looked, the two women relented, and Miranda sent a few quick messages, with Vesperia sighing. "Come back safe and be careful, alright? Your life takes priority over everyone else's, so if it truly comes to it, you must--"

"Stop," Jake said, raising a hand. "I'm not gonna abandon any of my friends or family as long as I'm still breathing. No arguments. And right now, I'm pretty damn sure I'm still drawing breath."

Vesperia looked like she wanted to comment but ended up just nodding. Miranda seemed done sending messages and looked at Jake. "Head to the teleporter now. Sandy and Arnold will be waiting there, and I also got a message Eron agreed to help and is heading there, as he also wants to observe this creature of desolation more closely. And, no matter what you say, do be careful. The Fallen King and Sylphie are both powerful in their own rights, and we're not even sure they need anything more than a lift back to Earth."

"Let's hope that's the case," Jake said, heading out the door with Miranda having moved out of the way. William looked hesitant for a moment before coming along with Jake, speaking on the way.

"I should be able to increase the accuracy of the teleportation slightly," he said in a careful tone, keeping up with Jake, who entered stealth while running, the karma mage doing the same thing as he switched to telepathy. "I tried hard to figure out who is behind this, and I did feel a connection to Ell'Hakan from the one we captured, not nothing definitive. The connection felt odd, warped, a bit akin to the other Chosen's own planet... I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't think Ell'Hakan is directly involved with this entire thing. Some karmic remnants of his influence do still linger, though. That's all I can really tell at this moment."

Jake looked at the karmic mage for a moment and considered what he said. He also considered that William offered to help with the teleportation, but no matter how much William kept trying to prove himself, Jake still couldn't bring himself to fully trust the guy. So having him potentially affect the teleportation...

"How about you come along with Sandy and me to check out this creature yourself? Then maybe you can get a better understanding of any links to Ell'Hakan or other enemies it might have," Jake offered, in

part to keep an eye on the guy and in part because he really wanted to know if Ell'Hakan was actually involved. The guy hadn't made any outright hostile moves in a while, and with the Fangs of Man theater Jake pulled off, this timing was very odd if Ell'Hakan was the schemer who'd planned it.

"If you're fine with that, I will... I did consider asking, but I assumed you would reject," William said, his answer not sounding like a guy who had planned to do anything shady.

The two of them kept sprinting to the teleporter, as Jake could only hope this entire rush was entirely in vain and that Sylphie and the Fallen King already had the situation fully handled and were just happy to get a ride home... though his intuition wasn't very comforting.

The Fallen King had battled many creatures during his life, especially while inside Nevermore. Quite a few unique ones, too, including, of course, two Unique Lifeforms in Minaga and the Ashen Devourier. Unique Lifeforms were known as very powerful but limited creatures... but this Desolate Child of Loss was by far the most limited the King had ever seen. At least, he believed it was, based on how it fought so far.

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Despite the progression of the fight and the constant damage the creature took from the continuous attacks of the King and Sylphie, it had yet to use a single skill. At least there were no apparent usages of skills. Its fighting style was just to take hits head-on without reacting while shooting out waves of desolation from its limbs and body while sometimes haphazardly lashing out.

However, more frustrating than anything was one simple fact he and Sylphie reached after they had been fighting for around seven or eight minutes:

They were losing despite how everything looked.

Swinging his golden hammers, the Desolate Child of Loss was struck from below and sent flying into the air as a crescent wave of wind left a cut on the shoulder of the creature, sending it spinning. Yet it quickly stabilized and waved its hand to release a cloud of desolation toward them, forcing them to retreat.

They couldn't back off for too long, though, as the King attacked again, shooting beams of golden force while Sylphie continued with her cutting wind. Both of them were heavily limited in what attacks they could use, Sylphie more so than the Fallen King, as she couldn't do her usual drive-by and charging attacks. In a brief moment of testing, she also confirmed that entering her wind form was borderline akin to assisted suicide as it would kill her in minutes within the domain of desolation constantly released by the Desolate Child of Loss.

Attacks such as big whirlwinds were also out of the question, and Sylphie's Authority was entirely useless as there was no wind for her to command. The Fallen King's usual blasts of force were also nearly entirely useless, and many of his soul attacks just didn't reach the creature but were made desolate before taking effect. The desolation was affecting everything. The environment, Sylphie and the Fallen King, their magic and concepts, and most certainly the Desolate Child of Loss itself. Nothing was left untouched.

And, truly, that was the crux of why, despite the Desolate Child of Loss being constantly on the back foot and not having landed a single blow aside from the one touch on the King and Sylphie's wing, the two of them were still losing.

It was a slow loss. Subtle. Insidious. The desolation wormed its way in to affect the two of them, even without them noticing. Healing desolation also took far more energy than other wounds. Being injured with the concept of desolation did not cause permanent or even semi-permanent damage immediately, but the mere fact it had the possibility of turning permanent was what made it so dangerous.

If a wound infected with the concept of desolation was left long enough, it would also make the Soulshape desolate until it passed a certain threshold of no return, at which point the damage would be semi-permanent, only fixable by evolution or someone extremely powerful interfering. Someone capable of fully eliminating the concept of desolation and reshaping the soul of the injured.

All of this is to say that he and Sylphie had to spend exorbitant amounts of energy to keep the desolation at bay while also attacking a foe that was barely affected by their attacks from the looks of it. Again, the King could see they did damage, and it was reasonable to conclude the Desolate Child of Loss would die at some point if they just kept attacking... but he had no way to determine when that would be, and it was a gamble they were unwilling to take the creature would drop dead before them.

Alternatives were already being discussed, and soon, it appeared a good plan was found.

The Fallen King received a telepathic message from Sylphie, informing him that help was on the way in the form of Jake, the healer from the Dao Sect, and the cosmic worm. It shouldn't come as a surprise that the King and Sylphie had already discussed running, but both had been reluctant due to their innately prideful natures. They both wanted to see if they could win and only run if it became absolutely certain they couldn't... at least not without doing something very extreme with long-lasting consequences.

"How long till they get here? In rough estimates?" the Fallen King asked.

"Ree," she sent back, naturally not knowing... all that was clear was that they wouldn't make it in time if this status quo kept going. They would definitely take over an hour as they would appear outside the atmosphere, and even with Sandy's speed, it took time to arrive on the surface.

"We will need to make a tactical retreat and meet them closer to the edge of the atmosphere," the Fallen King said, the bird in quick agreement as she unleashed a dozen air bullets, making the Desolate Child of Loss stumble with a few more small holes in its body.

Now the question just was... were they running only to escape or to turn the situation around once assistance arrived? Jake was weakened, yes, but even in his weakened state he should still be powerful. Dependent on how much the two of them were losing, there was a good chance they could win with not only Jake to help with powerful ranged attacks but also Eron, an extremely powerful healer who could alleviate many of their endurance-related challenges.

Sylphie clearly also had these considerations and asked the Fallen King what he wanted to do, and after a moment of consideration, he reached a conclusion.

"Let us see exactly how durable this creature is... if nothing else, it should buy us time to retreat," the Fallen King said. Sylphie didn't take long to agree. If they dragged things out longer, it would become too risky to try anything as they wouldn't have enough resources available if they had to retreat afterward, so now was the best time to strike.

Down on the ground, where the Fallen King and Sylphie had just launched the Desolate Child of Loss, the creature rose and began floating upwards once more, remaining entirely unbothered by the accumulating damage on its body.

If the creature truly didn't wish to try and dodge... he and the Sylphian Hawk would show the limits of their offensive might.

The Fallen King gathered his power as the golden veins all over his body began to light up, overpowering the monochrome world. Holding out his hands to both sides, the claws turned from ivory into pure gold as he infused them with more and more power. Soul-destroying light revolved around them as the King prepared to move, just as Sylphie struck first.

Unleashing her energy and will, the Fallen King felt the wind whisk past him despite the desolation. It came from all directions as Sylphie was pulling in the wind affinity energy from outside the sphere of influence of the Desolate Child of Loss. The creature that was floating upwards just stared at her as the otherwise unseen wind began to turn green, and the attack was unleashed.

A torrent of wind, even surpassing what had slain the Twinhead Emperor, barrelled down, and despite being weakened by the desolation, it struck hard. The creature once more didn't react as it was struck, the initial blast tearing off some of its skin and leaving small cuts all over its body as it was blasted downwards.

Soil and stone were thrown everywhere as the torrent kept going, and the King made his move. It seemed foolish, but the bird told him he could, so the Fallen King dove straight into the windstorm, only to have it all whisk harmlessly by him as the Unique Lifeform could only admire the bird's control over her Authority.

Not that he wished to see himself outdone.

The skin and flesh were getting torn off the Desolate Child of Loss as it was unable to move while getting blasted into the ground, allowing the Fallen King to hold nothing back.

Smashing his first Golden Claw down, the soul-destroying light temporarily bathed the world golden before it faded to colorless once more. A second strike arrived a moment after, and another flash of gold lit up the area, followed by a third a moment later.

The Fallen King kept striking down, each strike tearing apart not only the body of the Desolate Child of Loss but its very soul. Fragments of bone began being torn off, as the Fallen King's ivory claws also began

to deteriorate; his body bathed in desolation as he kept striking, every hit a Golden Claw that could usually instantly kill even monsters higher level than himself.

Soon, the wind slowed down, and the Fallen King also had to retreat before the desolation could affect him too much. So much of it had been released as they kept attacking, which was only more evidence they had done significant damage.

Attending to himself, the Fallen King saw the Desolate Child of Loss lay unmoving, its body broken in several places, with many of its bones torn off and missing, with one of its arms and a leg even lying a bit away.

As a final farewell, Sylphie gathered the rest of her wind and unleashed it as a cutting crescent wind blade that hit the unresponsive creature right in the neck, severing its head, with the following explosion sending the two body parts flying in separate directions.

The Fallen King had retreated a bit away by now and was healing himself before the desolation could take hold, and a tired Sylphie also stared down at their handiwork. For a moment, the Fallen King thought that perhaps they indeed did only need a bit of help getting back to Earth... but there was one big problem.

No kill notification... and the desolation all around them seemed to only intensify in power.

Then, the King saw movement as a headless figure with half its limbs missing rose from the ground, and a voice echoed throughout.

“I... not like fight... but... you... resist... you... enemy?”