

Hunter 981

Chapter 981: A Perilous Escape From Desolation

It was an unsettling sentiment.

The mere thought that this entire time, the Desolate Child hadn't truly considered them an enemy or been fighting back simply didn't make any logical sense. But, on the other hand... there had never been any killing intent. Never been any true effort.

It felt like the creature was just carrying out a regular everyday task. That killing the two of them wasn't an act of aggression but just something that had to be done.

Meanwhile, the Fallen King and Sylphie had both gone all out to try and end the Desolate Child of Loss, yet their efforts appeared to have been in vain. The creature had risen once more, and the two of them quickly exchanged telepathic messages. They shared the same opinion of what their next best step would be, as both shot toward the sky to make distance from the creature.

Below, the creature's severed body parts, including the head, all turned to gray dust as this dust flowed toward the Desolate Child of Loss and reformed its body. Its voice echoed yet again, the King feeling his flying speed slowing down from the mounting pressure of the desolation domain.

"You... try stop I... from helping... that... makes you enemy."

The Fallen King didn't even bother responding as he tried to fly faster, the Sylphian Hawk already well ahead of him due to her far higher speed.

"Enemies... must not exist."

A sense of danger washed over the Fallen King as he quickly spun around in mid-air and saw the Desolate Child of Loss hold out its newly reformed arm to one side as the desolation gathered and was made solid. A long, simple gray stick with a sharpening tip that barely qualified as a spear was formed, but the Unique Lifeform knew that appearances were very deceiving.

Raising its other hand toward the King, he wasn't sure what to expect, as he should be too far away for anything to reach him...

Oh, how wrong he was.

In an instant, the golden glow on his body faded as everything around him and even his own body turned entirely black and white. The desolation gathered at an unprecedented speed, and the Fallen King stopped making progress as the telekinetic magic he used to move himself was utterly suppressed.

All concepts in his immediate surroundings had been made desolate. Below, the creature raised its spear as it launched upwards, faster than ever before, as now it was no longer simply sauntering around. Raising his ivory claws, the Fallen King released his energy and released a Golden Claw, dispersing the field of pure desolation that had kept him confined as he also tried to counter the charging Desolate Child of Loss.

A second Golden Claw impacted the tip of the spear, launching golden sparks everywhere as the Fallen King managed to launch himself upwards from the impact, a hole now formed in his ivory claw that rapidly began to turn gray.

Raising his hand again, he didn't hesitate as the entire claw burned golden once more, and a third and even more powerful claw attack swept downward, creating some more space. The power of the skill had not only served as an attack but also pushed out the energy of desolation in the claw, and the King was

glad his natural weapons were incredibly durable in the first place... however, minor cracks had formed all over it now, and he knew blocking a second hit directly like that wasn't an option.

Sylphie also realized the King was in trouble and tried to help as she shot down condensed wind bullets, making the Desolate Child of Loss do another first. Two, in fact. It not only dodged some of the bullets but raised a hand as dense desolation blocked another few, all while it kept flying toward the Unique Lifeform, who was blasting himself upward with as much speed as he possibly could.

However, the Desolate Child of Loss was too fast and soon caught up to the Fallen King, who was forced to defend himself against the spear as best he could. The only lucky thing was that despite the creature now actually fighting, it still wasn't very good at it. It only used simple stabs and had little variance to its attack pattern... but with how powerful it was and with how weakened everything else around it was, this was incredibly dangerous in its own right.

Still, it gave the King what little leeway he needed to continue retreat with Sylphie's assistance. Not entirely unscathed, though. The desolation was naturally still seeping into him from all sides, and the attacks that struck him only made matters worse as time was rapidly running out.

After deflecting the spear yet another time while avoiding the sharpened tip, the Fallen King was forced to consume a Soul Marble – the unique item he could summon to temporarily boost his soul and even serve as a pseudo-rejuvenation potion – allowing him to launch a nasty golden blast go grant him some more distance, even if it put a strain on his soul.

He was running out of cards, and he knew it. Sylphie tried what she could, as cutting blades of wind forced the Desolate Child of Loss back a few times, but the creature hadn't lost its tendency to simply endure attacks despite actually fighting now. The difference was that it now only took blows strategically, even if its strategy was still rudimentary at best.

As the fight continued, they got further and further up into the sky, the desolation dispersing all the clouds as the domain followed the Desolate Child of Loss, and what few beasts or monsters they met on the way that hadn't known to escape died nearly instantly the moment desolation took hold. As they were flying fast, the domain at least still took time to form wherever they went, which allowed Sylphie to escape its influence occasionally, only diving back in to help the King.

With the creature chasing, the Unique Lifeform had no chance of also escaping the domain but simply had to endure it. However, he knew he would need to get out of it if he could, as that would allow him to travel far faster... and any shot at making it anywhere close to the upper layers of the sky required that to happen.

A massive waste, but there is no other choice.

The Fallen King did something he would very much have wanted to avoid, but unless he wanted to use his unique skill, this was the only other choice he saw. Spreading out his arms, more Soul Marbles appeared as the Unique Lifeform summoned nearly a thousand of them at once, each giving off a golden color that managed to resist the desolation.

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With a mental command, the Fallen King detonated several years' worth of work, and, for a moment, a golden sheen dominated the desolation as the world was colored yellow and the Desolate Child of Loss was blasted downwards, as the King allowed the waves of gold to wash over him as he was pushed upwards. His soul was injured when he detonated that many, but the golden waves had a healing effect on him, effectively canceling out the damage he had just done to himself. The blast hadn't done any real damage to the Desolate Child of Loss either, as the Soul Marbles weren't designed to do that, but they had managed to create some space between the two.

Taking advantage of the opportunity created by his wasteful action, the Fallen King shot upwards and soon was finally free of desolation as he entered a world with more colors than monochrome or gold. Sylphie was ready there, and a powerful wind swept up the Fallen King and helped him fly even faster as the two of them sped toward the starry sky above.

Below, the Desolate Child of Loss finally broke through the golden waves of pure soul energy that had suppressed it and saw that the Fallen King and Sylphie had gotten out of its domain. The two of them were hoping this would make the creature give up its chase and just return to the Prima Vessel... but once again, they were not very lucky that day.

Without any real hesitation, the creature chased. With the Fallen King out of the domain, he was a lot faster, but the Desolate Child of Loss still slightly outpaced the two of them. Sylphie was fast enough to escape on her own, but the Fallen King simply wasn't a speed-focused entity. Neither was the Desolate Child of Loss, but it had several levels on the King and its overpowered concept that allowed it to simply ignore everything, such as air resistance or any kind of resistance from the environment, including even parts of the space affinity.

All they could do for now was buy time and try to maintain distance. They also had to consider that desolation continued to linger within their bodies, and they had to stop at some point to address it before it had time to truly take hold. It was akin to an incredibly difficult-to-cleanse poison, and merely using vital energy while fighting was not enough to fully get rid of the concept. A good period of meditation to really cleanse oneself or a very skilled healer was needed... but right now, neither of those were options, and the more time passed, the more difficult all of this would be to heal.

Minutes passed as the Fallen King and Sylphie kept flying as fast as they could, Sylphie even trying to slow down their chaser a few times, but to no avail. It was slowly closing in, though they still had some time left to go before the domain reached them. When that happened, they would be in trouble, and the Fallen King could only begin to consider their options.

Looking at the bird trying to help him, the Fallen King didn't take long to decide. If he had to, he-

"Ree," Sylphie sent, interrupting the King's thoughts with a single message of hope:

Help was right around the corner, and they only had to hold on for a little longer. As for the King's prior thoughts of trying to fight and kill the Desolate Child of Loss today... he didn't even see that as an option worth considering anymore.

At the edge of the atmosphere of the planet, a giant worm broke through as it descended at high speed, entirely ignoring whatever natural defenses a planet usually had, as they didn't stand a chance at impeding the path of a Genesis Cosmic Worm.

Within its stomach, it carried a few people, including the three who had come to try and help the Fallen King and Sylphie.

To call Jake impatient was an understatement. Sandy also knew this and hurried as much as they possibly could, their mood not as jovial as usual. They were incredibly serious, and Jake also understood why.

He had banked on Sandy's overpowered revival skill, allowing them to escape even if things got too hairy by hiding inside the worm's stomach, but things weren't that easy. The Lord Protector had warned his Chosen about certain dangerous things that Sandy had to avoid even with the skill, as they could leave wounds even a revival would not heal... and desolation was right toward the top of that list.

Jake knew that dragging Eron and William along was pretty much risking their lives, and in truth, he was surprised Eron had even volunteered. He was also incredibly wary of desolation, which was actually

likely the main reason why he chose to participate. He was always keen on making up for his shortcomings, and to see a C-grade creature capable of using desolation was a great opportunity.

William wasn't someone Jake cared as much about, but he still didn't like the feeling of putting someone else's life at risk in this fashion. Sure, he hated the thought of risking the karma mage fucking up the teleportation more than that, but now that he had proven he hadn't tried to do that, and there were no clues he was going to try anything shady, Jake did feel a little bad. Only a tiny bit, though.

He did also give credit where credit was due, and the former psychopath metal mage had been quite helpful while teleporting, ensuring they had appeared right above the Prima Vessel and no more than a minute's flight from the outer edge of the atmosphere.

Jake had naturally confirmed this immediately post-teleport as he could feel Sylphie beneath him. She was flying up toward them while they were flying toward Sylphie and the Fallen King. As time passed, they rapidly closed in on each other, and Jake stayed in constant contact as he got vague messages from Sylphie. The Union Oath did not allow full communication, just vague emotions and images being sent alongside location tracking... but what he felt from Sylphie was enough to put him on edge, and he had to hold himself back from rushing Sandy. He knew the worm was already going as fast as they could.

Every passing second was excruciating as Jake felt them getting closer and closer, but as they got really close, the cosmic worm had some bad news.

"I will tell you already now that I can't swallow them if they are filled with too much desolation; the absorption process will be too difficult, and it's too dangerous to have them in here if my guess of their current state is true. They don't need to be entirely healed, but they need to not be leaking," Sandy said, not happy about having to deliver this message.

“I will try to cleanse them quickly. Once sufficiently healed, bring us back immediately,” Eron said in a serious tone as he looked over at Jake. “I will naturally need some time.”

Jake nodded, and William also looked at the two of them. “I can help a little... but I doubt my karmic magic will even work, and my metal manipulation doesn’t seem like it would work well when dealing with desolation.”

“Barely anything deals well with desolation,” Jake sighed as he prepared himself, an arrow already fully constructed within his quiver and ready to go.

The Fallen King struggled as Sylphie kept the Desolate Child of Loss at bay for a moment, allowing the Unique Lifeform to get a bit more distance without being attacked. He could only get so far, though. A few minutes ago, he had once again been caught by the domain of desolation, and from there, it had become an even harder struggle than before. The creature had been overly aggressive, manipulating the desolation far more actively to try and kill the Fallen King.

To help, Sylphie had fought the powerful creature off a few times, taking injuries and being forced into the desolation. The King was thankful and embarrassed he needed the help, but he had no time to think such thoughts. All he could think about was to keep moving forward as quickly as possible... until finally he saw it.

From above, a mass of energy approached, and the monochrome was pushed away as a large arrow glowing with arcane light tore into the domain, headed straight for the Desolate Child of Loss. The creature was in the midst of attacking Sylphie, making it fail to respond properly as it got struck right in the chest and launched downward.

Sylphie quickly disengaged and flew toward the Fallen King as several more arrows arrived, flying into the domain and straight for a confused Desolate Child of Loss that was forced to defend itself, giving the Fallen King enough breathing room to once more escape the domain of desolation alongside Sylphie.

At least for a moment, before the creature quickly adapted and began chasing once more, swatting away several of the weakened arrows and even tanking a few to not slow down too much.

They continued to ascend, and soon, the Fallen King and Sylphie saw the hunter raining down arrows, the healer from the Dao Sect and metal mage at his side, standing in front of a large cosmic worm, ready to lend a hand and hopefully allow their successful escape.

Chapter 982: Rightful Burden

Jake quickly nocked another arrow to release a barrage of purely stable arrows as he bombarded the creature he had identified as something called the Desolate Child of Loss. It definitely wasn't the kind of name of some "normal" race or anything like that; at least, Jake didn't think so, but neither was it a Unique Lifeform.

In truth, Jake had no idea what the fuck they were dealing with. No one seemed to, but right now, it didn't matter as he kept attacking to buy space for Sylphie and the Fallen King, with the latter especially in need of assistance.

The Protean Arrow Jake created had been one with the express intent of getting the Desolate Child of Loss away from the two of them and was made nearly entirely of stable arcane mana, and he had even tried mixing some neurotoxins. He was fully aware that the desolation would rapidly make anything he did to the creature lose all effect, but he didn't need it to last that long in the first place.

From the looks of it, it proved to be enough and Eron, alongside William, quickly stepped forward to help. The healer flew to meet the two being chased as William activated his boosting skill to full power right away as silver armor covered his entire body, and raising his hand, a giant shield of pure metal

appeared. Runes covered it all over, the young metal mage infusing it with more and more mana as he waited for his opening.

After Jake managed to land a powerful arrow that curved to surprise the Desolate Child of Loss, the mage made the nearly five-meter-wide and more than ten meters tall tower shield float down in front of him as he punched it with his palm, launching it down toward the Desolate Child of Loss.

Assisting the mage, Jake looked down at the Desolate Child of Loss as he did something potentially risky. His eyes glowed for a moment as Primal Gaze activated, and he stared at the soul of the creature as its soul also stared back at him...

What?

Jake stumbled back, but the skill had activated way more effectively than Jake expected, the Desolate Child of Loss screaming toward the sky in pain right as its entire body froze, and the metal shield slammed into it, sending it flying down toward the upper layers of the clouds at incredible speeds as William kept channeling mana into it to push it downward.

This made the remnants of the domain of desolation closest to them slowly begin to lose power, and with the Fallen King and Sylphie fully out of it, Eron quickly made his way to them. They both looked off, their bodies having lost their usual luster, as if they hadn't been fully colored while everything else was. Sylphie's usual vibrant green was muted and nearly gray, while the Fallen King's gold was just glowing white lines, and both of them practically oozed out desolation into the environment.

Eron naturally knew their situation wasn't that good, and he held nothing back as he appeared right in front of him. "We are in a rush, and I do not have the time to be gentle, so accept the unpleasanties that are to come."

The healer held out a hand toward each of them as his body erupted in white flames, and his voice echoed as he boosted himself beyond his usual limits, even using Words of Power to further amplify what he was about to do. "May you be purged by fire."

With those words, the two of them erupted as white flames consumed them, and Jake finally managed to gather his thoughts properly after using Gaze as he heard Sylphie screech from the pain of Eron's arcane affinity forcefully burning away the desolation within their bodies.

He looked down toward the creature that had inflicted the desolation and saw it had managed to finally tear apart the metal shield, pushing it down, and even as he drew his bow to keep attacking, he couldn't help but frown.

The feeling the Desolate Child of Loss gave off when he used Gaze wasn't really one Jake could describe easily, but if he had to, he would say its entire existence felt... wrong. Jake had used Gaze on many things throughout his life, seen many forms of souls, and been confronted with many creatures, but this one was the one that made the least sense to him.

On the one hand, it reminded him of the Yalsten Shade of Eternal Resentment he had seen back in the Treasure Hunt. That creature had been a living curse spirit made from pure curse energy and the collective consciousness of all those who had powered the curse with their negative emotions. This Desolate Child of Loss definitely had aspects of that, but as mentioned, it felt wrong.

What Jake saw also reminded him of the Ashen Devourer and even the Fallen King. There was that hint of uniqueness in there, traces of something that was truly one of a kind, yet also somehow oddly familiar. As if the creature had Records didn't truly belong to the Desolate Child of Loss, and yet they fully did, having been transformed as the creature had become what it was now.

Finally, there was what held it all together and made this walking entity of wrongness even function. Because despite everything seeming like a mess, it was all one stable creature, fully balanced and stabilized. This was not some creature that would die within a few years if left alone, though with its Path, perhaps evolutions would be difficult, but certainly not impossible. Possibly, Jake even had it entirely wrong, and it didn't even need to struggle to evolve... the only thing he really knew was that the creature was extraordinary.

Because the final trace, the ultimate building block that made up the Desolate Child of Loss, reminded him of something he felt was impossible to see in a C-grade:

Divinity.

Not to say the creature was a god... but it had the power of faith, and not just a little. Truthfully, Jake wasn't at all experienced in how exactly faith worked. All he knew was that the Holy Church was the foremost users of this kind of concept and intangible energy, but he had a very hard time seeing them actively having taken part in creating something like the Desolate Child of Loss. Its entire existence seemed antithetical to what they wanted.

All Jake knew for now was that whatever he had seen when he used Primal Gaze wasn't simple, but it did have a faint sense of feebleness to it, which was why his skill had been so effective. He didn't know if this was due to the creature's impossible soul or because of the concept of desolation, but in either case, it meant it wasn't infallible.

There was just one problem with using Primal Gaze right now... Jake's own soul was also fucked up, and having used the skill only once had already put quite a strain on him. Alongside the boosting skill Jake had active on the stable 30%, he really didn't want to push himself too much further. Having a damaged soul and lowered resources really didn't play well with forcibly raising those resources with a boosting skill, and he knew he couldn't keep it up for long lest he wanted to set himself back the last few months of progress.

Releasing several arrows, Jake tried to damage the Desolate Child of Loss as he began diving downward to keep the creature away from Eron and the two people currently being healed long enough for Sandy to eat them and get the hell out of there. He also told William not to interfere anymore to allow Jake to benefit from Lone Hunter, instead having the metal mage make sure Eron could work in peace.

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The creature dealt with most of Jake's attacks pretty effortlessly but did take a few minor wounds, mainly because it seemed distracted. As they got even closer to one another, Jake entered the domain of desolation, his body already covered in Scales of the Malefic Viper, allowing him to resist it for the most part. Right as he entered, the Desolate Child suddenly stopped, Jake also stopping as this development wasn't bad, seeing as his job was to buy time.

"You... I know you..." the Desolate Child of Loss said, looking confused at Jake.

Infusing his own voice with power to answer, Jake stood ready as he felt a powerful undercurrent of killing intent in the words despite the apparent confusion. It was as if the creature didn't know why it knew him in the first place. *r*

"We have never met before, so I would find it highly questionable if you claim to know me,"

Jake said, wondering if perhaps it was due to the core he had eaten and was still absorbing energy and Records from – even if the process was now painfully slow.

“No... I remember... you servant... Chosen...” the Desolate Child of Loss said, seemingly trying to collect its own thoughts. Then, it seemingly all clicked in place as it raised its gaze and looked straight at Jake. “I know. You pure evil. Enemy.”

The last words were said with pure hatred as the creature stared straight at Jake, its bloodlust growing. It bent its legs slightly and pointed its spear forward, ready to pounce as it spoke one last time. “Unworthy... but must still be saved.”

Jake quickly reacted courtesy of his danger sense as the creature teleported, appearing right in front of him a fraction of a second later, stabbing for his neck. Twisting his body to the side, Jake avoided the spear and countered as two katars appeared, but found himself too slow as the creature swept a hand upwards, a torrent of pure desolation washing over Jake as his scales screamed but still held on.

Gritting his teeth, Jake went on the offensive to try and claim the momentum of battle and set his own tempo. He stabbed forward, the Desolate Child of Loss dodging while trying to counter, but Jake was one step ahead and punched it in the stomach with Eternal Hunger. The blade sunk in deep and he felt the displeasure of the Sin weapon as it didn't even try to absorb any energy from the creature of pure desolation.

Mostly unaffected by the attack, the creature tried to strike him again, but Jake circled around his opponent, making use of his higher speed to not be caught out while staying in extremely close melee range to make the usage of its spear harder. He was fully aware none of this would be possible without his scales, as they limited the effect the domain had on him, and if he lost them, he would probably not even be able to move at half his usual speed. With them, he was still weakened, but by far less. This was definitely a big reason why the Fallen King and Sylphie had struggled so much. The desolation simply weakened everything to absurd levels, and while Jake could remain somewhat unaffected in body, his offensive might was still incredibly weak.

It didn't help that the little neurotoxin that lingered within the Desolate Child of Loss was soon fully made desolate, allowing the creature to get even faster as it became more evenly matched with Jake, though he still managed to stay on top speed-wise. He wasn't sure for how long, though.

Jake quickly stopped trying to deal damage entirely but went purely on the defensive. At least the creature was fully focused on Jake with hatred he had no good explanation for, giving Eron time to help Sylphie and the King.

Despite his scales, Jake couldn't simply shrug off the desolation, as it did begin to slowly seep through and enter his body, but not faster than he could rid of it himself. He wanted to keep himself in a state where Sandy could eat him at any moment. Still, the desolation did make him get a little slower and weaker the more time passed, and soon, he didn't even have a speed advantage.

With little choice, he did something Jake had wanted to avoid as Arcane Awakening fully activated, his body exploding with arcane energy. Jake felt like he had just set his soul on fire, and the pain was excruciating, as if he had just torn a wound open and decided to pour chili sauce on it. Still, he kept a calm head as he continued facing the creature head-on, now with a small advantage once more... but he knew he only had minutes left.

As he quickly released a Pulse of Perception to check out how the others were doing, he saw that Sylphie was already gone, having likely been eaten by Sandy, with the Fallen King still encased in flames as Eron had a worried look. William stood in front of them, also looking concerned as he had some magic circle in front of himself, seemingly doing that karmic scan or whatever he had talked about on their way there.

Jake hoped they would get shit done and be ready to move out of here very soon as Jake kept fighting. By now, he already knew he had likely set his healing back slightly, but he didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

Another minute passed, and something Jake had dearly hoped wouldn't happen happened. His boosting skill began to waver, and it was soon no longer able to stay active unless Jake forcibly kept it going... at which point he wasn't just looking at setting back his healing journey but adding even more on top of it.

Just then, he received a message he hoped was that they were ready to go. However, sometimes things just didn't work out that way.

"Hey... this isn't good. Eron is working as hard as he can, but the desolation has already gone incredibly deep inside the Fallen King. As he is a creature that is more soul than physical body, he takes far longer to heal, and Eron doesn't think he can get it done in any quick manner... Sandy tried to absorb him anyway into a separate stomach, but the devouring skill simply didn't work due to the leaking desolation..." William sent Jake telepathically.

Needless to say, that was a very bad message to receive, and despite his struggles, Jake instantly sent one back.

"I can't keep this up much longer... we need some other plan," Jake said, a trace of panic now setting in.

Should they try to run without Sandy eating the King? No... he was too slow and couldn't keep up. Maybe Sandy could eat Jake, and maybe they could try to drag the Fallen King somehow... no that was so dumb. His mana string wouldn't last more than a moment under the power of the creature's domain.

The thought of using the mask to summon the Fallen King had naturally occurred to Jake but he knew he couldn't. Ever since he took the soul damage, the summoning function had been shaky at best, and now, with the King damaged and inflicted with desolation, it was impossible.

In the end, Jake resigned himself to doing something he had no idea what would result in. He still had some Origin Energy remaining to use, and if he-

“Your thoughts are so easy to read,” the Fallen King’s voice echoed inside Jake’s head, and he saw through a Pulse the King was now standing up, the flames gone, and Eron having backed away toward Sandy alongside William.

A wave of relief washed over Jake as he assumed the healer had made it in time, but then, he saw the Fallen King flying straight toward him as the Unique Lifeform spoke once more.

“The desolation has gone too deep. It has taken hold and refuses to let go,” the King said, his voice melancholic. “I was too slow, too weak, and not familiar enough with the concept of desolation to adequately battle it. There is none to blame but myself... so do not risk yourself needlessly anymore.”

Jake realized what the King was doing as he protested. “I can-“

“This is my choice, my failure, and you do not have the right to bear the consequences. Only I can decide who that burden falls to... and I've already rightfully chosen,” the Fallen King cut him off as the creature landed a blast of golden force that made the Desolate Child of Loss stumble back slightly.

He wanted to protest more, but Jake didn’t get the choice as the Fallen King turned toward him and lifted his ivory claw toward its mask. The claw began to glow golden as the Fallen King infused power into the mask, the Desolate Child of Loss charging the Unique Lifeform from behind, with the King not even reacting.

Golden fractures formed all over the mask as the Fallen King clenched its claw... the mask shattering entirely, sending streams of golden light into the mask Jake was wearing. This was one of the last things Jake saw as a wave of pure golden soul force struck him, sending him flying back as his consciousness wavered and began fading away.

For a brief period, the entire domain of desolation was overpowered and suppressed, and the soul of the Fallen King burned brighter than ever before in a final golden blaze of glory as the King turned toward the reeling Desolate Child of Loss, ready to show why Unique Lifeforms were so feared all across the multiverse... especially in their final moments.

Chapter 983: King

The Fallen King watched as the hunter was blasted back and gave him a small extra push so he reached all the way to where Sandy, the metal mage, and Eron were still waiting. The healer quickly dispelled whatever desolation lingered on his body before Sandy could swallow the two of them. They had naturally been briefed on the plan and were carrying out their roles as expected.

They hadn't been given a choice, mind you, but had simply respected the King's decision.

Turning his attention toward what mattered more right now, the Desolate Child of Loss was clearly reeling from the blast, but as with everything else, the desolation had nullified much of the attack. Not that the Fallen King was particularly bothered, as this was the expected outcome.

Unique Lifeforms and their unique skills could also grow over time. The Fallen King usually released a singular wave of soul-destroying energy whenever he used the skill and would find himself weakened afterward. However, this time, he had severely limited the explosion itself and instead channeled the same power into his current form. He had saved it as a trump card for Nevermore that he never ended up having to use. This time, he'd used that skill and even decided to go one step further, as he did not need to worry about any kind of weakness period after the skill usage.

His soul was ablaze and would burn till there was nothing left, and when the Desolate Child of Loss tried to ignore him and go straight for Jake, whom the creature seemed to harbor illogical hatred for, it offended the King. Raising his claw, it glowed golden as the creature of desolation stopped right as it tried to fly past the Unique Lifeform.

"As of this moment, you cannot afford to focus on anything but I," the King said and clenched his clawed fist before tossing the Desolate Child of Loss away telekinetically, the creature looking confused at what had just happened.

Raising his other claw, the Fallen King released a wave of force that blasted the creature even further back before he gave chase. Behind him, Sandy had consumed both Eron and Jake, with all of them now heading down toward the Prima Vessel.

Once more, the Desolate Child of Loss tried to chase Sandy, only pissing off the Fallen King even more as he reached out with both claws and took hold of the creature, not allowing it to move. It stared at the King, utterly befuddled as it tried to dispel his hold but was unable, the King only shaking his head at the response.

It was typical, wasn't it? For one's final moment to be one of epiphany.

The situation was truly odd. The Fallen King had felt his telekinetic abilities be so useless during this fight due to the desolation... but at this moment, it was the opposite. His body radiated power, and his vision was filled with gold as he clearly saw the Desolate Child of Loss before him. He saw the soul of the creature, and rather than simply grasp for the physical body, he reached for the metaphysical.

He reached out and applied his telekinetic abilities directly to the soul of the Desolate Child of Loss. Rather than tossing the physical body, he tossed the Soulshape, forcing the body along with it. And as he tried more, the King felt a sense of total control as, with both claws raised, he pulled the creature toward him.

He had no fear of the domain of desolation anymore. He allowed it to infect his soul, as he knew it would not have time to consume the King's soul before he himself burned it to oblivion. In fact, right now, the Desolate Child was the one who screamed in pain as it was forced to endure the pressure of the King's blazing soul.

Lashing out, the Fallen King released a golden claw, tearing up the body of the Desolate Child of Loss before following up with another. Each attack tore through both the body and soul of the creature, making it scream in pain as the King gave it no time to rest.

With every attack, the Fallen King felt the intense damage he did, but his own vessel was also rapidly deteriorating. Parts of it flaked off with every passing second, turning into golden wisps that were made into gray motes of nothingness the second they touched the desolation.

He had known this would be the case from the very beginning, and it was his choice.

Despite being overwhelmed, the Desolate Child of Loss didn't just roll over. Finally having realized Jake was out of its reach, it attacked the King relentlessly as it exploded with desolation, trying to fight back the golden soul-destroying domain of the Fallen King.

Emphasis on trying... for despite the creature's power, it could not suppress a Unique Lifeform burning away its very life in a final blaze of glory. It did try, though, and went on the offensive, seemingly having transferred its anger to the King rather than Jake.

It stabbed forward with its spear, the Fallen King deflecting the blow with his golden claw as he fully entered melee to allow his own domain to be the most effective. Taking injuries while fighting in close combat was inevitable for the King, but he did not care in the slightest, as he dealt out more than he was given.

Even when the spear penetrated his chest and went out of the other side, the Fallen King only used it as an opportunity to entirely tear off the head of the Desolate Child. When his one leg was severed, the

King used the limb as an improvised weapon to stab into the chest of the creature before making it explode with golden force.

Despite having its body blown and torn apart several times, the creature kept simply regenerating, but this time, the King saw the entire process as he clearly saw the Desolate Child of Loss' soul. From it, he learned something quite important. ◆

"I realize now that your body is no more than a construct. A representation of what you once were. An idea, a faint memory. You are not truly a humanoid creature, but some mutated elemental of desolation, not that much different from the Sylphian Hawk, though far more limited. Killing your physical form thus does little more than drain your energy as you are forced to reconstruct it," the Fallen King mused out loud, regretting not having given someone a Golden Mark so he could communicate his observations... though there was a good chance it would have burned away by now.

Reaching out and grasping the soul of the Desolate Child of Loss, he twisted as the entire arm of the creature also twisted around before getting torn off.

"It makes you a difficult foe, especially with the power of desolation protecting you at all times... but all creatures, no matter how powerful, die when their soul is extinguished. You are no different."

A massive golden claw descended as the creature stumbled, having large parts of its body torn off with every attack, with the King taking plenty of counters as his own body was destroyed at a rapid pace.

"My original intent was to buy time... to allow their escape in time, believing myself chanceless," the Fallen King said, all this talking more to himself than the Desolate Child of Loss, who didn't seem to have the mental faculties to properly comprehend what he was saying.

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"Now, I am thinking otherwise. That perhaps rather than fall on my lonesome, I shall drag another soul down with me," the King said with determination as he reached forward and clasped his claw around the creature's face before clenching, crushing it entirely as the body of the Desolate Child of Loss was getting more and more feeble with every time it regenerated. It simply didn't have the time to properly temper itself, and the extreme soul damage also made the Soulshape of the creature less stable.

Not that the Fallen King was doing well. His vision flickered as he felt his soul waver, soon out of fuel, giving the Desolate Child a chance to counter, stabbing the Unique Lifeform yet again, the desolation spreading even further.

The body of the Fallen King was a mixture of bright gold and entirely monochrome sections, fighting each other until there was nothing left. The desolation would win, no doubt about it, but the King had never once done this expecting to walk away... the only question was if there would be two creatures dying that day.

Jake felt the warm flow of healing energy running through his body. The sensation was comfortable and even made him feel like he should just fall back into unconsciousness, but he quickly remembered the circumstances of how he had been knocked out in the first place.

Jolted awake, Jake opened his eyes and saw Eron staring down at him alongside a worried Sylphie. He instantly knew he was inside Sandy's stomach, and through his sphere, he also saw William in the stomach chamber with them... but there was someone missing.

"What happ-"

"Later," Eron interrupted him. "For now, we need you to get us home."

Trying to sit up, Jake could barely move, and a headache instantly struck him, but he had to stay stable despite everything swimming. Eron helped Jake up as Sandy spat them out, and they appeared right in front of the entrance to the Prima Vessel.

Sandy shrunk themselves down quickly as Eron helped Jake walk to the barrier requiring the keys of a World Leader to unlock. Throughout this walk, Jake's mind was a mess, as if he was really drunk or extremely tired, but he managed to focus long enough to unlock the barrier and give them access to the teleportation circle.

It was all a struggle, but eventually, Jake made his application to teleport back to Earth. After it was promptly accepted, Jake was teleported back to Earth along with the others, everything still feeling like he was in the midst of some messed up lucid dream. He knew he had overdrawn his soul significantly, and he felt like taking a nap more than anything.

When he was back in safety, his consciousness wavered even more, and Eron kept healing him as he spoke.

"Rest. Now is the most crucial time to allow your soul to naturally recover or the damage will only get worse," the healer said, the healing energies more there to calm Jake than actually help him heal.

Jake knew the man was right and did as told, allowing his waking mind to slip, as he knew he would enter sleep with a single thought still haunting him:

What had happened with the Fallen King?

The Fallen King attacked again, his blow weaker than before but still doing some damage as the Desolate Child wavered. By now, the King really felt it. If he was capable, he would have smiled at the emotion emanating from the creature as his voice echoed within the mind of his foe.

"Is this your first time experiencing fear? Knowing that death might claim you? How hypocritical... a creature of desolation fearing to be made desolate itself."

With his telekinetic abilities, he reached out and tore off the arms of the Desolate Child before blasting a hole in its shoulder, its body so feeble now as it struggled to heal itself continually. Its soul was significantly damaged, and the King tried to damage it even more.

Reaching out yet again, the King tried to grasp the Desolate Child but found himself unable. The creature took advantage and sent a torrent of desolation toward the King, making him stumble and weaken. He wasn't ready when he was stabbed yet again and tried to reach out, only to fumble.

Everything flickered yet again. The pain permeating the soul of the Fallen King was all-consuming as the desolation and feeling of burning his own life and soul clashed, and for a moment, a thought appeared as he questioned himself:

Why?

Why had he done something this foolish?

Sure, the desolation had been bad, but the King had been far from a state where he couldn't recover given enough time. Yet he had chosen to step forward without any real hesitation... and deep inside, he knew why.

The King had been the one who had chosen this planet. He had been the one who made the decision to teleport there in the first place. Could he have reasonably known it was a trap? Probably not, but just because this situation wasn't his fault, it was still his responsibility.

He was, above all, a King. What kind of King couldn't even take basic responsibility for the decisions he had made? Well... most kings across the multiverse would likely gladly sacrifice the lives of their subjects for their own benefit, but the Fallen King believed such a Path of kingship was flawed.

And he chose to believe his Path as a King was the right one, right to his final moment. His three forms of concepts had always been the foundation of his Path, and he had named the three force, gold, and soul.

Force represented the enactment of his power as a King. The forceful hand that made his will a reality and ensured his dominion even in front of his opposition. It was also what allowed him to defend his position and those who were beneath him or stood by his side.

Gold was status. In itself, the concept was what allowed him to strike not just the physical bodies of his foes but their souls, and the concept was heavily used when he used his actual kingly abilities outside of combat. It also just helped amplify everything the Fallen King did, and in some ways, it could be viewed as the color of his soul and the symbol of his power.

The final part was by far the most important.

Soul was everything. It was his dominion. What he was the King ruling over. The only thing all living creatures in the entire multiverse had in common was the fact they had souls. Some didn't have physical bodies, some didn't have any of the usual resources, and some were existences so foreign the mortal mind could barely understand them... but they all had souls. From the smallest level 0 critter to the most powerful of Primordials. Even the Void Gods had souls despite how foreign they were to the rest of the multiverse.

Most kings of the multiverse ruled over their own kind. A human king would rule a faction of other humans or at least humanoids. The natural nobles of the multiverse, such as the ectognamorphs with their Hive Queens, naturally ruled other insects... but the Fallen King had no kin. He was a Unique Lifeform. He had no kin that he naturally ruled.

Another interpretation of there being none that he naturally ruled was that he was made to rule everything. That he was kin with every creature that possessed a soul and what skills he had related to his title as King did reflect this.

All these thoughts swam around the King's head as his life faded away, and he felt the attacks of the Desolate Child rain down on him. His remaining life was in the seconds... and he was to make them count, as the wisps that represented the King's eyes glowed golden, and he caught the spear of the Desolate Child.

"Be proud of what you have accomplished today. Few can claim to have slain a Unique Lifeform... even if it cost them their life."

Telekinetic power erupted from the half-broken claws of the King as he pulled the Desolate Child into his own shattered body and held him there in a final embrace as he prepared for his final blow.

"I... must... live!" the creature screamed, its body exploding with desolation as the Fallen King's vision entirely faded, and yet he could only chuckle to himself.

"Then survive if you can."

The Fallen King overloaded whatever was left of his body as he forcefully activated his unique skill one last time and turned what remained of his vessel into one last attack. Golden cracks formed all over his body, the light beaming out of them pushing away the desolation as the Desolate Child of Loss tried to get away, but there was no way the Fallen King would relinquish his grasp. A final vain thought entered his head as he remembered something Jake had once said and spoke a final time.

"No king rules forever..."

His entire body exploded as a giant blast of pure golden soul energy consumed the screaming Desolate Child of Loss as its desolation was overwhelmed, and the creature itself began to fall apart as its soul shattered and its entire body dispersed, blown into nothing but gray dust that fell and was scattered by the wind, devoid of desolation

"... long live the King..."

His voice faded away as the consciousness of the King disappeared, and the golden light in the sky dispersed. Color reentered the world once more as the sunlight shone down from above, and a faint breeze swept through the sky where not a single trace of the Fallen King or Desolate Child of Loss remained.

Chapter 984: After the Fall

The interior of the lodge was silent as a wood-like mask lay on the table in the middle of the living room. The Sword Saint, Sylphie, Miranda, William, Eron, and Sandy were all inside the room, looking at the mask.

Jake had been knocked unconscious for nearly three days after he returned from Earth, having entered what Eron described as a coma-like state to protect himself. He had strained his soul too much during the fight, resulting in his healing journey being set back by a little, but honestly, Jake didn't care about that right now.

They had all gathered once Jake was awake, and the Sword Saint had returned from saving another planet in their galaxy. It had only been appropriate to wait for him, as the old man had spent several decades with the Unique Lifeform, and while Jake couldn't say they had been close, they hadn't been unfriendly either.

All of them were silent for a while until the expected blame game began, and everyone had only a single person they believed was at fault: themselves.

"I should have been able to get back faster," the Sword Saint said in a severe tone while frowning. "Not until it was too late did I realize how severe the situation truly was..."

"I shouldn't have been a fucking moron and gotten myself injured. If I only I had been a condition to properly fight, I could have been the one to buy us time," Jake also said, feeling like he was far more responsible than the Sword Saint, who hadn't even been there.

"Ree..." Sylphie sadly let out a small screech. She was sad and angry at herself that she hadn't been faster or stronger. That she hadn't heard the whispers of the wind earlier and made their escape or that

she hadn't insisted on running right away when the Desolate Child of Loss had not been overtly aggressive.

Out of everyone, she was perhaps the one who blamed herself the most, as she had been there from the beginning. They had been a team going around together, taking down Prima Guardians and saving planets, and she felt like she'd let her teammate down and left him for dead.

"And I should have had better intelligence so that all this could have been prevented," Miranda agreed and sighed. "But blaming ourselves won't help anything, and while I can't say I knew the Fallen King that well, I at least knew him well enough that he would have called us all foolish for dwelling on the past and not focusing on the future."

Jake kind of wanted to protest but kept quiet as he could almost hear the admonishing words of the Unique Lifeform that they dared waste time sitting like this together just staring at a damn mask rather than spend their time productively.

Looking at the mask, it hadn't changed in appearance in the slightest. Then again, it hadn't really changed ever since Jake got it. Thinking back, wasn't this the piece of equipment he had the longest if one didn't count his boots and necklace that he'd upgraded several times using different items? Wasn't the mask the only thing that had remained mostly unchanged, at least when it came to its effects?

Jake couldn't remember anything else he still had from all the way back in the tutorial which he actively used. Maybe his cauldron and bed... but they weren't the same as something he wore on his face all the time.

Despite its lack of changes in appearance and effect, the description of the Mask of the Fallen King had undergone some changes whenever something major happened with the Unique Lifeform he originally got it from... and this time was no different as it had once more been updated.

[Mask of the Fallen King (Unique)] – A mask containing the Records and Truesoul of the Fallen King, a mighty Unique Lifeform. The mask is made of a wood-like material unique to the lifeform it comes from and it does not obstruct vision when worn and regenerates itself from any damage taken. The Truesoul and final intent of the Unique Lifeform remains within, allowing this item to continue growing as you grow in power. Enchantments: Truesoul of the Fallen King. Passively absorbs mana in the atmosphere, increasing mana recovery rate by a large amount. Increases maximum mana by 25%.

Requirements: Soulbound

He had made it so everyone could see the description as he quite honestly didn't care to keep it a secret, and it didn't have much in there that he believed was worth keeping hidden in the first place, even if he knew the mask – purely as a piece of equipment – surpassed even Eternal Hunger in some areas. Anything giving percentage amplifiers was incredibly rare, after all, and he knew it was only possible because of the unique nature of the mask.

As for the actual contents of the description... Jake wasn't exactly sure what it all truly meant. He remembered the conversation he had with the Fallen King shortly after the Unique Lifeform's resurrection and what he'd said back then.

Not even the King knew what would happen if he died with his physical body. All they both knew was that the mask contained the Truesoul of the Unique Lifeform, and it had since the very beginning. In some ways, the mask could be viewed as the "true" body of the Fallen King, but it wasn't as simple as that.

The mere fact Jake had gotten experience from the Fallen King the first time around meant he truly died... and this time, he had died once more. This left some hope, as Jake saw a way to once more bring the Fallen King back to life, and he even had a healer in the room who knew more about souls and healing than any other C-grade he was aware of.

Asking him was only natural, and the healer took a while before he sighed.

"All creatures in the multiverse have souls. That's simply a law of the world... but they tend to have more than a soul. A Soulshape. An actual physical or even metaphysical body, but no matter what, they have something that exists within reality. The Unique Lifeform known as the Fallen King had neither of these... when I healed the vessel he called his body, I noticed how foreign it was to anything else, which was a big reason why I couldn't truly heal it. The Soulshape had been created from scratch, every part of it meticulously designed and infused with what felt like parts of the Fallen King's Truesoul, which shouldn't be possible according to what I know," the healer said, speaking with a higher level of uncertainty than usual.

"What I'm saying is... the Fallen King wasn't a creature with a soul, but a soul that made itself a creature. It's all in reverse done through what I can only describe as methods worthy of being called unique and not anything I believe regular beings could achieve."

"Doesn't that mean he can be healed like he was the first time around?" Jake asked with a high level of hope as he looked at the mask, not entirely understanding what Eron had said. "Chances are his soul is just slumbering and slowly regenerating within, and given enough time, he should be back... maybe with another item like the Soul Renewal, we could resurrect him fully."

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Eron sighed again and continued. "The situation was very different. I'm unaware of what led to the circumstances of the Fallen King back then, but clearly, he had prepared for his own resurrection and planted the seed for it to happen. He had transferred all the required parts of his Truesoul into the mask before his death, either on purpose or on accident... but this time, he couldn't. He burned away all those parts."

"But that doesn't mean he's not going to be able to resurrect himself given enough time. I'm sure an arrogant ass like him wouldn't just-"

"Jake... there's no spark," Eron interrupted Jake with a severe look as he kept staring at the mask.

Jake opened his mouth but stopped himself as he clenched his fists. Back in the Treasure Hunt, Eron had recognized Jake's mask was special because he sensed the faint spark burning within it. If there was none now...

Eron sensed the mood and continued talking.

"There are a lot of things we don't know, and Unique Lifeforms are called unique for a reason. The Truesoul of the Fallen King is still sealed in the mask. Usually, when something dies, every aspect of the soul disperses except for the Truesoul which returns to the system, but the Fallen King's Truesoul didn't. I have never heard of someone dying without their Truesoul being reclaimed before. That's why when truly resurrecting someone, it's very important to act quickly, as it needs to be done before the Truesoul is reclaimed, or the resurrection will fail. Of course, there are ways to delay the Truesoul leaving, and sometimes it does linger... but not in the form of an item that can even be Soulbound," Eron spoke, saying a lot, yet not much they didn't already know.

"You're saying that right now, not knowing exactly what is going on is a good thing," the Sword Saint chimed in.

"Essentially, yes... and while I did say there is no spark, there clearly is still something in there," the healer agreed with a nod, silence once more overtaking the lodge as Jake just kept staring at the mask. He clenched his fists and felt the pain shoot up his arms from his still weak and overburdened body.

Another bizarre thought also struck him. Before, he had never really considered it, but he would essentially be wearing the corpse of a comrade on his face. It was already a bit weird before that he was wearing the "body" of the King, but now it had just gotten worse. Jake didn't want to just write the King off, though. The multiverse was full of possibilities, and he did still have the mask.

Plus... the King had done something right before he knocked Jake out. Golden wisps of light had flown from the King's mask and into Jake's own, and nothing really explained that. Maybe it was just some final transference of energy, maybe it was a final parting gift to allow the item to keep existing, or maybe it was the Fallen King planting a small seed of faint hope... no one knew, and as the Sword Saint and Eron said, right now not knowing was a good thing.

For now, whatever hope he could find was what Jake would hold onto until he knew for certain the King had no way to ever return. Also... he had considered using his Primeval Origin abilities to see if they could help heal the King, but he truly had no idea how that would work or if it even would work. After the Palate disaster, he wasn't just going to randomly be testing either.

If he fucked up, he could end up dispelling what hope there was by destroying the mask and sending the Truesoul back to the system. That, or perhaps he did somehow end up resurrecting a Fallen King... but not the Fallen King. Maybe he would create an entirely new Unique Lifeform sharing the same abilities as the King but without his memories and personality, and if he did that, was it truly a resurrection?

Jake didn't believe it would be... so for now, he wouldn't do anything stupid. In some ways, maybe his prior stupidity was a good thing in that aspect because if he hadn't had his "accident," there was a good chance he would have tested his Jake Juice without much apprehension, and that could easily have ended even more disastrously than Jake merely dealing severe soul damage to himself. He already felt shitty enough over Villy suffering backlash from using his Transcendent skill, so if he had ended up effectively killing someone's hope for resurrection, Jake wasn't sure how he would have dealt with it.

After they all sat in silence for a while longer, Sylphie went over and picked up the mask before bringing it to Jake and putting it in his lap before looking up at him. Jake smiled and scratched her feathers as he took the mask and donned it on his face once more where it belonged.

The description said the item would continue to grow in power as Jake got more powerful... and he would be damned if he didn't at least keep the Truesoul of the Unique Lifeform fully saturated at all times so that if he was ever brought back he couldn't give Jake a scolding for slacking off too much. Again.

"I know this isn't the best time to bring it up... but there is still the matter regarding the Desolate Child of Loss," Miranda said after Jake had put on the mask, it all serving as a moment of slight catharsis.

The mood in the room instantly had a damper put on it when the creature that had caused the death of the Fallen King was mentioned. Sylphie looked angry, and Jake wasn't happy either. He still felt weird about the creature, though.

He was used to fighting either dumb monsters with no proper sapience or intelligent opponents who knew what they were doing. The Desolate Child of Loss fell into an uncomfortable in-between. It was clearly sapient and yet not truly intelligent enough to properly comprehend why it did everything it was doing.

Jake wasn't sure if it was even worth thinking or talking about anymore. They didn't truly know if it was dead or alive, though, and this wasn't a situation where not knowing was good. There was one thing that led them to even have this conversation above any other:

No kill notification.

"We can't know if the creature survived or not," Jake said, shaking his head. "My intuition isn't really giving me anything either, but my senses are a bit out of wack right now, so I'm not sure how trustworthy they are."

Miranda nodded and looked at the metal mage who had been standing in the corner, not really part of the conversation but in the lodge because he had been part of the team that went to help the King and Sylphie and to share his insights from the trip.

"I can't say if it's truly dead, but what little karma I could feel before is now undetectable... again, this doesn't mean that it's dead, but it does at the very least mean that the creature has gotten severely weakened to a point where it isn't conscious," William said with a high level of certainty.

"No matter if it's alive or dead... why did such a creature even exist?" Jake asked the karmic mage. "It clearly hated my guts and spoke weirdly in tongues."

"It did hate you, and its animosity toward you was extreme to a borderline impossible level, and it was clearly born already hating you... but the karmic thread wasn't normal. It was as if the hatred wasn't truly the creature's but merely something it had inherited or that it had been indoctrinated into believing you were the definition of evil itself," the mage said, frowning.

"Is Ell'Hakan involved?" Jake asked, some of his killing intent unwillingly leaking out at the mere thought of that orange fucker being part of this shit.

"Yes and no," William said. "This creature was connected to Ell'Hakan for sure... but I can't really say he had any real relation to the creature. The Desolate Child of Loss's connection to him was similar to the one it had with you. It was unnatural, and I sincerely doubt Ell'Hakan was even aware this creature existed before it began making itself known by turning planets desolate."

"Did it also hate him?" Jake asked.

"That I couldn't tell for sure, but it didn't feel that way at all, and the connection it had to him was far more powerful than the one it had to you, but also far, far weirder," William said. "I can't really describe it properly. The connection is there, but more from a conceptual and records perspective rather than any actual personal bond. The best way I can describe it is the connection between someone having grown up constantly hearing about someone and knowing everything about them without ever actually meeting, with the other person just someone with an unwilling fanatical mega-fan or mega-hater in your case."

Jake listened and remained quiet as Sylphie spoke.

"Ree, ree."

"Yeah, for sure," Jake nodded.

Sylphie pointed out that even if Ell'Hakan wasn't involved... someone else clearly was. Someone intelligent who had been scheming this. The planet had been a trap and the World Leader had obviously colluded with someone to teleport the Desolate Child of Loss there with impeccable timing.

Someone had caused this... and Jake would be damned if he didn't hunt down and kill every single individual even tangentially related.

After he had some more time to recover and not be in a complete and utter shitty state, that is.

Chapter 985: Intelligence Work

Miranda hadn't stopped her investigation into what had happened to the Fallen King and Sylphie even after the situation had seemingly been resolved. She refused to believe there weren't more traitors on Earth, perhaps even some high up in the system. A few more administrative staff were identified over the next few weeks who had all been incredibly suspicious. Some weren't even immigrants from other planets but natives of Earth.

Arthur took the lead in many of these investigations, as the vast majority of these people were from his prior base of supporters. The United Cities Alliance had been formed by the people who opposed the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and, in general, people who wanted to preserve Earth as it was before the system. In other words, they didn't want any immigrants or non-humans anywhere, and rather than live with beasts in a semi-synergistic society, they would rather see them all killed. They simply refused to see them as the sapient creatures they were now.

The push of the World Council to not only allow immigrants and freed slaves to settle on Earth but even beasts to live among humans had naturally ruffled some feathers, and the recent return of the Risen had only made things even worse. While they had done much to address these people, it was hard to do anything toward people merely harboring negative thoughts or acting in the shadows.

No one wanted a society where you could get in trouble for thinking the wrong thing either, so they'd ended up with a lot of people carrying resentment and a lot of bigotry toward anyone who wasn't a human while naturally also hating other humans who didn't share their beliefs.

This was a problem Miranda, Arthur, the Fallen King, and the Sky Whale had discussed extensively, with the shared sentiment that nothing but time could fix these issues. The old generation had to die off and be replaced with more progressive people who weren't used to a world before the system but what the multiverse had now become.

Anyway, insidious actors had found plenty of people to take advantage of, and many jumped at the opportunity to seemingly do meaningful damage to Jake and his allies, who were "actively destroying the planet."

These insidious actors naturally included allies of Ell'Hakan. Quite a lot of them, in fact. However, when looking into them, Miranda and Arthur were perplexed at some of the things they found, and with the assistance of William, they discovered everything wasn't as simple as they looked. Rather than finding one group... they found two.

One was the agents of Ell'Hakan, who had seemingly gone into sleeper mode for the last pretty long period, likely doing nothing more than reporting things to the other Chosen while not taking any actions. A few had even gone as far as to spread rumors about what had happened actually when Ell'Hakan invaded the planet so long ago, how it had all been a misunderstanding caused due to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and some even claimed it had been a good thing as it "opened the eyes" of the Viper's Chosen to what his Patron truly was.

None of them did anything overtly harmful to Earth and weren't really threats at this moment.

This all seemed to track with Ell'Hakan's recent official stance where he no longer ran any negative propaganda campaigns toward Jake. Instead, he didn't seem to say much about Jake at all, and what was said was neutral at worst. Truly, it did seem like he was trying to spin a tale of Jake and Ell'Hakan being enemies due to their respective Patrons and having no personal animosity toward each other... meaning that should Jake "break free" from the Malefic Viper, they would have no reason to oppose one another. Should he join Valhal, perhaps they would even be allies.

When it came to these people who loyally served Ell'Hakan and acted according to his will, Miranda just kept an eye on them and took notes. Taking any actions would ruin their own plans. Also, keeping an eye on them while not doing anything would instead help Jake's cause, as she was sure the people she sent weren't all competent enough to not be discovered, and the fact that Earth's intelligence network knew and didn't act against his agents would certainly get back to Ell'Hakan, only further strengthening his delusion that Jake had softened his stance toward his fellow Chosen.

As for the second group, also made up of Ell'Hakan supporters, they were quite a bit... different. These people seemingly were no longer actually in contact with the other Chosen but acted entirely on their own and had made their own small groups and plans, entirely – and purposefully – separate from the true followers of Ell'Hakan.

Of course, ironically, these people believed they were the "true" followers. As for their exact beliefs... Miranda couldn't figure them out, and it soon became clear it wasn't because she was shit at her job but because they truly didn't have any collective belief outside of thinking that Ell'Hakan was some kind of godlike being and that Jake and the Viper were evil incarnate. They had a flimsy cohesion at best, and all the true fanatics were immigrants who Miranda suspected had also been immigrants on the planets they had arrived on Earth from.

These fanatics had then found allies among the natives of Earth, making wild promises that Ell'Hakan would save them all from the evil snake cult, eradicate all the beasts and monsters, and return the planet to its rightful owners: humanity. Truly, it was all bullshit and didn't even track with what Ell'Hakan would actually do... but it was good enough to convince the desperate morons who let anger and fear of the foreign rule them over logic.

Miranda truthfully didn't even want to get into the complexities of the delusions at play, and there was a good reason she called them fanatics. They acted illogical and with intense emotions to the level it was irrational, making her form quite a few theories she had no proof of but would certainly keep in mind. The predominant one was that Ell'Hakan had perhaps wanted to create followers with absolute loyalty and it had gone wrong somehow, and yes, the vast majority of her theories included Ell'Hakan having done something extreme with his Bloodline that had then ended up backfiring.

She would think he knew what they were up to if not for all the evidence speaking to the contrary, and while William still wasn't the most reliable source, he had proven himself honest in all matters so far. Her view of William was a bit odd, as she naturally didn't know him from back in the Tutorial. She had never really interacted with him or even heard about him until he came and began to actively help around Haven, which did make it hard for her to see why she had to be so damn suspicious of him all the time. Because right now, he just seemed like a kid trying to desperately make himself useful.

Then again, she did realize he had been blessed by Eversmile, been a terror and absolute psycho during Jake's Tutorial, and even sided with Ell'Hakan afterward, again due to Eversmile. Casper and Jacob had also confirmed pretty much everything Jake had told her, making it clear she had to be wary even if he had supposedly changed. Caution was never a bad thing in her book, but she didn't want to be overly cautious and not make use of a valuable tool due to preconceived notions either.

The young metal mage had also come by after having proven himself useful that day, having investigated a group of fanatics. They ended up not really being that problematic or worth dealing with and had only been in contact with someone they'd already gotten rid of a week ago.

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"How many more of them do you estimate there are out there?" Miranda asked with a raised eyebrow.
"Of these real fanatics, that is."

"It's impossible to tell, at least for me," William shook his head. "I can see the karmic connections people have and even glean some insight here and there, but I wouldn't call it an exact science, and we would undoubtedly catch many innocents in the net if we wanted to cast it based on people's karmic connections." ❖

"What if we just limit it to the people who have been directly influenced by Ell'Hakan? Those with a direct connection to the Chosen?" Miranda asked, these people being the most important to address.

"Easier, but we still need individual investigations," William said after thinking a bit. "Many high-level diplomats or World Leaders who were part of the Prima Guardian Alliance met Ell'Hakan at one point or another, but that doesn't mean they are loyal to him. Kindroth should be proof enough of that."

Miranda nodded and sighed, annoyed that the karma mage was right. Kindroth – also known as the Voice of the One – was still a weird figure. By now, Miranda was pretty sure he had his own plans, but clearly, those plans didn't include helping Ell'Hakan. Quite the opposite.

Time and time again, he'd proven himself useful and even helped the investigation significantly. The elf still held a lot of sway over many of the other World Leaders and used that to try and out any dissidents. Plus, he was really good at what he did, which, more than anything, was being a conman. He even made people who usually only liked humans like him. If he had been a political opponent, Miranda would have found him frightening and she was happy he appeared to remain an ally.

Still, she kept an eye on him, even if she did believe they would remain allies for now, as their interests did seem to align. Even if he was useful and competent, he still wasn't as effective as William, though, as karmic magic was simply overpowered for outing spies, and it was good to have the heretic of a Primordial specialized in karmic magic on their side.

She had also considered and knew asking if using karma to look just for those Ell'Hakan had messed up with his Bloodline wasn't possible. At least William couldn't do anything there, as he couldn't use his skills to track anything Bloodline-related due to how the system worked.

The problem with karmic bonds was also that while they went two ways, one side could have a far more powerful bond based on individual perception or understanding. It was honestly all a mess.

"Would you meeting directly with Ell'Hakan help your efforts? Even if you are only observing him from afar," Miranda asked the mage, as William instantly shook his head and shut the idea down.

"I... don't want to find out," William said as he looked at the floor and hesitated before elaborating at least a little. "Meeting Ell'Hakan would simply be too risky. With his Bloodline... no, I can't risk it."

Miranda just kept quiet, prompting William to continue on his own. "I already don't trust most of my emotions. They still feel foreign at times, and I'm uncertain what influence of Eversmile still lingers. I'm such a fucking mess Ell'Hakan is bound to find something to take advantage of..."

"It's alright," Miranda just said with a smile. "Having met him myself, I can't fault anyone not wanting to be in his vicinity."

The mage likely had a very good point... he wasn't suited to confront Ell'Hakan or even be in his presence, and Miranda should have known so, given his history. He had a track record of being used and manipulated, so it was only understandable he had developed some level of trauma towards someone who had a Bloodline all about manipulating the emotions of others.

It was a dangerous Bloodline to everyone. Miranda had to be extremely careful while around him, always keeping her own emotions in check, and even so, she wasn't certain it worked. How could she be? If she felt

like she hadn't been influenced, that could easily just be because Ell'Hakan wanted her to feel that way. No, the only people Miranda knew of who had managed to remain unaffected were the Sword Saint and Arnold.

The Sword Saint because he had a mind trained with discipline and had an "old soul," so to say. He knew himself, he knew his emotions, and he knew how to calm them in an almost meditative state, not allowing them to affect him. His mind was like a serene pond that would instantly notice if any ripples formed from outside influence. It was something Miranda admired about the man and certainly one of the biggest reasons he had come as far as he had and even managed to become a Transcendent.

Meanwhile, Arnold was Arnold.

Anyway, William left the office soon after, and before he left, they switched the topic and discussed his next job, leaving Miranda alone with her work once more as she quickly went down to the cellar beneath her office. Well, rather than a cellar, it was more like a large cavern she had Hank help construct a long time back, also making use of the coffins from the Treasure Hunt and many other natural treasures to help enhance her abilities as a witch.

She had some targets to take a look into and a few who had to meet unfortunate ends, and quite honestly, it was easier for them to simply disappear, consumed by the swamps of the Verdant Lagoon, rather than make a big show of killing them. Plus, this meant they didn't have corpses to clean up, saving a bit on the city budget.

Miranda sat in the center of the large magic circle as the runes lit up all around her and sunk her consciousness into the land beneath her as she became one with Haven and started her little hunt.

"It truly stopped... they must have done it," Jacob said with a smile as he looked at the map of the Milky Way. He had been keeping a close on it over the last weeks and noticed something... the spread of dead planets had stopped entirely. He'd tried to divine why already but found himself unable to.

"It can't really be anyone but them, can it?" Bertram, who stood with him, agreed. "I just hope they're all still fine."

"They should be. Jake is the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and while desolation is incredibly dangerous, it's one of the concepts the Malefic One is incredibly potent with," Jacob said. "Of course, nothing is certain..."

Jacob had discovered the nature of the creature a while ago through his divinations. He'd recognized the signs of desolation within his dreams and visions and realized what kind of creature it was, though he

naturally didn't know everything. He'd kept a close eye on it, but then, suddenly, it had stopped doing anything, and he could no longer divine anything regarding the creature of desolation.

Ell'Hakan had also noticed this and questioned Jacob, who'd decided not to share anything he didn't have to. Despite having developed the teleporter that allowed him and his allies to travel to planets not even part of the Prima Guardian Alliance, he had not once shown interest in confronting the living calamity sweeping their galaxy.

Jacob had even begun to suspect this was because Ell'Hakan had something to do with this creature, but reality proved to be far more simple... he just didn't care. He didn't see the creature as any kind of priority. The Chosen didn't even believe killing some unknown menace would help his discourse, as no one really knew about it, seeing as everyone who'd been terrorized by the creature of desolation was dead.

He would rather "save" more planets and have them integrated into his alliance than actually do something good, and Jacob did find it hypocritical that the "evil" snake cult Chosen and his allies ended up being the ones doing a good deed.

Speaking of good deeds...

Valhal had been quickly making a name for themselves across the galaxy, all with the support of Ell'Hakan to help spread their name and influence. The Holy Church also helped Ell'Hakan – Jacob even being there proof of that – and the Church had even hired the Court of Shadows and some mercenaries, making their progress of killing Prima Guardians even faster as they began teleporting all around the galaxy, even to planets who hadn't asked for help.

As they stood there, looking at the map that outlined the state of their galaxy, Bertram spoke. "I can't even begin to imagine how this all ends..."

“Neither do I,” Jacob confessed. “I do truthfully hope for a peaceful solution... one that limits needless bloodshed. We can only pray that Jake will be open to diplomacy and peace talks or at least that Miranda will push for a mostly conflict-free resolution. Perhaps Ell’Hakan will need to leave the galaxy for good, but his followers should be fine.”

“Maybe such a thing can be achieved,” Bertram shrugged. “Jake isn’t the most caring of guys, so as long as no one really close to him is killed, it should be possible to negotiate with him.”

For some reason, when Bertram said that, Jacob felt an odd premonition and a shiver run down his spine but quickly shook it off. Yeah... that wouldn’t happen, right? Because if it did... Jacob had a hard time seeing this entire galactical event end in anything but bloodshed.

Chapter 986: A False God & Proactive Measures

While the Milky Way was certainly the most action-packed galaxy of the ninety-third universe, it was still only one of countless galaxies undergoing the Prima Guardian event. Wars were happening everywhere as innumerable planets fell to the event every day, with even more overcoming what many believed to be the final system-made test for the newly integrated planets.

To many, this event was a challenge one was simply meant to overcome and a disaster for the planet due to the large number of dead innocents dealing with the armies of regular primas. However, to others, this was nothing more than an opportunity.

Massive factions made use of this time to truly stabilize themselves, using the excuse of a common threat to unite everyone under their banner if they had failed to do so earlier. It was also a great opportunity to make contact with native factions yet to fully integrate themselves with multiversal factions and bring them into the fold.

Valhal, the Holy Church, Altmar Empire, the Primordial Church, beastfolk tribes, Risen, and a vast array of divine factions gladly exploited any and all opportunities to get a foothold in the new universe, preparing for what was to come when the universe opened up to the rest of the multiverse.

To make things even better, this type of recruitment using the event even had a built-in test of sorts. The planets facing their Prima Guardian alone would only join the alliance after achieving victory, proving that they had at least some level of competency, making them worth recruiting. As for those who failed to deal with their Prima Guardians... well, that didn't mean these were a lost cause. They just wouldn't be claimed by factions of the enlightened races.

Because while a planet falling to the event was a disaster in the eyes of the enlightened races... it was an opportunity for the monster races. The Prima Guardian was not a creature made to rule a planet. It was not created to be the beast king that suppressed every other monster, but just a tool from the system to turn the Planetary Pylon into a Planetary Core should the enlightened fail to beat it.

Shortly after accomplishing this task, the Prima Guardian would once more go to the surface of the planet, having fulfilled its role. From there, it would wait until the system event expired, and when that happened, the Prima Vessel would disappear, reclaimed by the Seat of the Exalted Prima, and the Prima Guardian would naturally die.

However, with its role fulfilled, the Prima Guardian wasn't sure to survive. With the event effective over, it was no longer immune to attacks from native beasts, and even its bond with the regular Primas would be severed. A system notification would be sent to all monsters, letting them know that another "event" had begun, this one aimed at them, with their goal the same as the enlightened: kill the Prima Guardian and claim the key.

The Prima Vessel would still disappear after the event was done, and these monsters wouldn't join the Prima Guardian Alliance or anything like that... but they could qualify to also be contenders for claiming the Seat of the Exalted Prima, the same as many World Leaders of the universe.

While it wasn't always equal, the system did tend to act fairly and not discriminate based on whether one was a monster or an enlightened. Each had its own advantages and disadvantages, and while the enlightened certainly had more system events, it was because the monsters already had the inborn natural advantages to do well during the integration, and unlike the enlightened, they had been helped along by unique items provided by the system.

Overall, the monster population of planets did tend to surpass the enlightened, with the enlightened usually only doing well due to their cohesion. Monsters were simply far worse at working together, and the mere fact the majority of major factions in the multiverse primarily consisted of enlightened races was proof of that. Even the powerful monster factions, such as the Dragonflights, were only cohesive due to all being dragons and generally all very humanoid in how they acted... and even they had plenty of internal conflicts as different variants of dragons didn't always get along.

Factions with beasts or monsters of multiple races all working together were remarkably rare, and it was nearly only seen with the United Tribes, and even there, the name itself communicated that it was just a large alliance of many different tribes coming together to rival the truly massive factions of the multiverse.

It also had to be pointed out that most factions were totally fine with monsters joining them, though it tended to only happen in higher grades after they achieved humanoid forms. Even the Holy Church had its fair share of monsters, as even they could undergo a baptism. So, many monsters chose to just join an established faction rather than make one with other monsters.

Anyway, the result of Prima Guardians winning on planets tended to end up with it being a victory for the monsters, with the planet then turning into somewhere nearly devoid of enlightened, with the few enlightened that did happen to survive now far from being able to claim themselves the rulers, and as the generations passed, there was a good chance they would even lose contact with the rest of the multiverse unless other factions came by their planets.

Some monsters even made very sure that the enlightened were either entirely wiped out or taken control of, though.

Hives of the Endless Empire were a good example, as most actually decided to help the Prima Guardian in slaughtering the enlightened of the planet, only to afterward kill the Prima Guardian and proceed to round up all the enlightened. Deciding if the enlightened were then killed off and used for food or enslaved was then dependent on how useful the Hive Queens judged them.

Vesperia's approach to the entire matter was very unusual by Endless Empire standards and was done primarily because of Jake and her sensibilities toward the enlightened races and because she knew the Milky Way galaxy would never be claimed by the Endless Empire. Thus, she judged it better to set the standard for working together in synergy from the beginning.


The Endless Empire was naturally far from the only monster-focused faction claiming their planets, most of them not big factions but smaller ones with the local monster leaders guided by singular gods and their own small forces. Many didn't really engage, though, as the enlightened winning didn't necessarily mean the monsters would be wiped out, and many monster factions – like on Earth – even worked with the enlightened.

Thus, naturally, the vast majority of planets were claimed by the enlightened races, and as the months quickly passed, more and more Prima Guardians fell one way or another. Maps of the galaxy all across the universe were all being filled with flags of different colors, the Milky Way holding two interesting records.

The first one was for being the galaxy with the most planets marked with black flags, courtesy of the Desolate Child of Loss, and because planets being ruined in C-grade conflicts was really fucking rare.

Second was a more positive record... due to the development of teleporters, allowing the two major alliances that had formed to help even the planets that hadn't joined the alliance, the Milky Way was in the lead for the highest amount of Prima Guardians dealt with, and as things were going, on track to be the first galaxy to finish the event, well before the time limit of the event expired.

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This also meant the World Leaders of the Milky Way Galaxy had to be the first ones to consider... what would happen once the event was over and the vast cross-galaxy teleportation network facilitated by the Prima Vessels stopped working? **R** 

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"A False God," Carmen said with a serious look on her face as she sat inside Jake's lodge. She had just recently arrived back on Earth from having gone around killing Prima Guardians with Valhal. Knowledge of what had happened to the Fallen King naturally hadn't spread beyond a few select people, but Jake had chosen to tell the Runemaiden anyway... which proved to be a very good idea as she knew some obscure as fuck knowledge no one else seemed to.

"You're saying this Desolate Child of Loss was an actual god?" Jake questioned, finding the notion ridiculous.

"Not at all, hence why it's called a False God and not an actual god," Carmen scoffed. "They're more like spirits than gods. Their name just comes from how they are born and is honestly more of an insult than merely a way to describe them."

"Can you tell me about them?" Jake asked with interest.

"Eh... what was it again..." Carmen said, searching her memory. "Right... so you know how shamans work, right?"

“Very loosely, but they form pacts with elementals and channel their power or something, right?” Jake said.

“Right,” Carmen nodded. “Shamans are generally known to come in two forms. The ones who create a bond with a singular elemental or other spirit-like entity they then grow alongside, and the more religious sort who form a bond with a being far more powerful than themselves, sometimes even gods.”

“I did read about that,” Jake nodded as a motion for her to keep going.

“Well, there is a third type who is a bit more heretical in nature, which is probably also why they aren’t spoken much about. These shamans don’t form a bond with a creature at all, and yet they receive power anyway... because rather than bond with an actual living entity, they bond with the idea of one. Think about before the system how a bunch of people worshipped random made-up gods without any real evidence of their existence besides just pure faith,... this is pretty much that,” Carmen explained.

“That doesn’t sound like it should work,” Jake frowned. “How in the hell do they receive power from something that doesn’t exist?”

“Ideas are powerful and can birth concepts. Think about it, with Willpower alone, you can do shit just by thinking about it. Now imagine an entire civilization believing in some divine being. Actually, you don’t even have to imagine it; just look at all the damn religious factions around who farm faith from their followers like they’re cattle. Alright, now actually imagine if this faith had nowhere to go, and yet a lot of people genuinely believe with all their hearts something does exist... that energy sometimes ends up forming what we call a False God. The belief something exists makes it actually exist,” Carmen continued explaining what Jake believed was pretty obscure knowledge based on how neither Jake nor anyone else had come across it. Then again, it wasn’t as if they were the most knowledgeable group.

“So some faction formed a False God because they believed hard enough it actually existed?” Jake questioned, highly skeptical of the notion. “That seems oddly... non-extraordinary. In that, I would expect it to happen all the time...”

“Well, it doesn’t, it’s actually pretty fucking rare, even if some do exist out there, mainly serving as totems of tribes who aren’t in contact with the rest of the multiverse or something like that,” Carmen answered. “From how the shaman I did Nevermore with explained things, it didn’t sound like anyone truly knew all the conditions for one to appear. All I know for sure is that a lot of genuine faith is required, which means most people who know actual gods exist don’t even qualify as their faith isn’t genuine. Some major event also has to happen, which leads to the formation of the False God, and finally... extremely strong emotions tend to be required. Unnaturally strong emotions.”

Jake’s face fell at the last part. “Fucking Ell’Hakan.”

“Yep, I have a hard time seeing he isn’t somehow involved based on what you said,” Carmen just agreed.

Over the last few months, they had discovered some more things about the planet the Desolate Child of Loss had originally come from, and they quickly learned that it had been part of the Prima Guardian Alliance. Originally, it was a faction of orcs who all seemed very keen on Ell’Hakan, but nothing much was known beyond that.

“Do you think it’s possible that-“

“You know, my exact thoughts based on everything I heard is that Ell’Hakan tried to make people super loyal to him, ended up mind-fucking an entire planet of orcs to view him as an actual living god, and then somehow, shit hit the fan, and they ended up forming what we know as the Desolate Child of Loss,” Carmen said, pretty much reading Jake’s mind.

“We can’t know for sure, but that does sound pretty probable,” Jake said with a sneer. “It all leads back to him and that Bloodline of his.”

“Yeah... not gonna lie, it’s scary as fuck,” Carmen said, making a show of shivering at the thought of it, even if she was genuine in her concern. “It’s bad enough that it was made expressly clear I was not to ever be even on the same planet as him, and if we were, I had to stay on the opposite side of it. Orders straight from the big guys and gals above.”

“Sounds like a policy every faction should adopt,” Jake sighed. “No, scratch that, every person should adopt it.”

“Hear, hear,” Carmen agreed with a smile as she looked at him closely, and her look turned serious. “I need to tell you... False Gods... they’re not easy to get rid of. Their lives linger in an annoying fashion, and to truly kill them, you sometimes need to destroy whatever totem binds them to existence.”

Jake mimicked her serious look and frowned. “Knowing the methods of the King... would a False God be able to survive if their soul was blown to smithereens?”

“I have no idea,” Carmen shook her head. “I’m not an expert; I just know what I was told. You know, when spending decades with someone in Nevermore, you’re bound to have plenty of conversations about random shit and get to know one another, intentionally or not.”

Jake didn’t say anything but just faintly felt for the mask he’d made invisible. He knew very well how it was unavoidable to get close to someone after spending fifty years together.

Carmen noticed Jake's expression and turned apologetic. "Sorry... look, I'm sure you can find some way, right? It kind of seems like the thing you do, isn't it? Stuff that shouldn't be possible? Why is this time any different?"

"Thanks," Jake just said, the mood getting a bit down before Carmen tried to bring it up.

"Now, for a brighter subject... you know, for being a cripple, you don't look all that bad," Carmen teased him, and Jake was more than happy with the change of topic.

"Barely a cripple anymore," Jake smiled. "I actually recovered quicker than Eron expected me to."

The healer wasn't sure why Jake healed faster, but the prevailing theory was that his arcane affinity was involved, or maybe his Bloodline was helping somehow. Ultimately, it didn't matter much... what mattered was that Jake could now see the end of the tunnel and was already considering what would come next.

His time for a full recovery also seemed to coincide with another major happening: the clearing of the final planet, ending the Prima Guardian event for the Milky Way Galaxy. This forced them all to consider many things... and later that day, they would have a meeting in Jake's lodge to go over everything with most of the influential people back on Earth. They had chosen today because not only Carmen would come back, but Jake's little brother would also finally return, along with Maria and everyone else from Earth worth having in the meeting.

Miranda had also made a schedule and list of topics for the meeting, with lots of subjects to go over before she would later have a meeting with diplomats and whatnot to actually get stuff done. However, Jake considered adding one more thing to discuss.

He'd been thinking a lot over the last many months since the King fell, and honestly... he was tired. It was not just because of his heavily injured soul but all the bullshit that had been going on over the last many years. This talk with Carmen only cemented his thoughts further, and he decided to finally bring it up.

Having collected his thoughts, he turned to Carmen and wondered about her opinion on the subject.

"Hey, Carmen... rather than waiting around for Ell'Hakan to do his shit, why don't we take proactive measures?"

"How so?" Carmen asked, unsure what Jake was getting at.

Jake opened and closed his fists and once more felt the mask on his face. "Ell'Hakan wanted a fucking war for so damn long... why don't we consider giving him one if he wants it so badly, but this time, it's on our terms?"

Chapter 987: Discussing the Future of the Milky Way Galaxy

The lodge had once more become the unofficial meeting spot for when things that shouldn't be shared widely were to be discussed. Probably because only people Jake trusted tended to be invited. This time around, things would be a bit different, though, as quite a few people who usually never would be allowed to visit were coming. In part to help build trust and in part to show that Jake had nothing to hide as his healing journey was more or less over.

Later on, he had actively chosen to exclude some individuals, though. That was for when they came to the part of the meeting regarding a certain Nahoom.

Jake didn't want those affiliated with large factions to take part, as he feared what they were to discuss was something people would feel obligated to report back to their higher-ups. This did mean that even his own brother wasn't allowed to take part, but this was the best decision in Jake's eyes.

However, for now, the meeting was one not about the Chosen of Yip of Yore – at least not directly – but about the state of the Milky Way and their plans going forward. Before everyone arrived, though, he and Carmen did have a rather enlightening conversation after Jake asked her about starting a galactic war against another Chosen... and she took his question incredibly seriously as she looked in thought for a while before answering.

"I'm not sure El'Hakan wants a war anymore, and I'm even more unsure of how Valhal would respond... but it does feel inevitable a clash has to happen at some point," Carmen muttered after she'd gotten over the shock of Jake's proposal. "We both know some shady shit is going on, with a bunch of gods making plans behind the scenes, so I'm not sure acting too hasty would be smart. Unless you're fine with potentially ruining whatever plans the Viper is cooking up, that is."

Jake looked at her for a moment before shaking his head. "Give me a bit of credit here. I have at least considered that, and I wouldn't want to do anything without the Viper being on board... and I have a feeling we will soon be able to find out if he is."

"You mean...?"

"Yeah, I believe that communication to those outside our little universe will open up once our galaxy is done with this event and that we won't have to wait for the entire damn universe to finish dealing with their own Prima Guardians," Jake nodded.

Carmen frowned at Jake's words and seemed to not be entirely sure if that was a good or a bad thing. "Let's discuss this again with the others when the time comes... I have a feeling it can't be as simple as just invading his planet and beating up the guy after your god gives you a thumbs-up."

"Or maybe it will be," Jake smiled. Truthfully, he still wasn't entirely certain he would be able to discuss matters with Villy once the last Prima Guardian in the Milky Way died, but he did feel and seriously hoped it would. He didn't want to do anything without talking to Villy first, as he knew this matter with Ell'Hakan was larger than mortal matters.

On the other hand... he really did feel done dealing with Ell'Hakan's bullshit. Even the potentially unintentional bullshit he had spawned in the form of the Desolate Child of Loss. Taking down that thing had cost way too much.

Hours passed as Jake and Carmen shelved the topic for now and just kept talking about other matters – most of them related to combat. Soon enough, it was time for the meeting to begin as everyone arrived one after another, Miranda naturally the first one to get there.

Not long after, Arnold and Eron both arrived, with Caleb and Maria not far behind. Vesperia, Casper, Lillian, the Sword Saint, and even Kindroth also made their way to the lodge as more and more people arrived to discuss the future of the Milky Way. The only notable absences were Jacob and Bertram, who hadn't been invited for good reason. Carmen was also clearly out of place in the eyes of many due to the official stance of Valhal when it came to the conflict between the Viper and Yip, but no one was going to ask her to leave because of something silly like that.

Jake's little lodge had never been this full before, and he was happy Hank had made it so large when he'd originally built it. People did have to bring their own chairs, though, as soon they were all gathered. Jake got quite a few looks as he hadn't publicly been doing much recently, and many probed him subtly, with Jake gladly confirming he was pretty much back to full power and the strongest person in the room.

Miranda was the one to initiate the meeting once they were gathered and the initial greetings had gone out. She looked at the crowd of people who'd helped with this entire system event, with several new faces among them, such as Kindroth, six other World Leaders who represented bigger groups, and even William, who Jake had graciously allowed to take part courtesy of his recent contributions.

"Thank you all for coming here today. As I'm sure you're all aware, the curtains are soon drawing to a close, and shortly, the Milky Way will be free of Prima Guardians and will, more likely than not, be the first galaxy in the universe to have overcome the system event. Many of you here have greatly contributed to this greatly accelerated timeline, especially with the construction of the cross-galaxy teleporter," Miranda said, primarily directed at Arnold, who didn't even seem to fully realize she was talking about him.

"I know many of you have suffered during this time, and many planets are still reeling from the event, but we sadly do not have time to address everything. We must consider what comes next. Kindroth, did you check how close we are to the final Prima Guardian falling?"

The elf propped himself up as he bowed slightly to Miranda and spoke.

"All the planets yet to be rid of their Prima Guardians are among those who didn't join the alliance and are all being helped in a more... forceful fashion. Not that they are complaining, at least the general populace isn't. These planets tend to not have killed their Guardians for a good reason and are more than happy to have saviors swoop in and rid them of their foes," Kindroth said in a calm voice before sighing. "They are even grateful enough to ally with whoever saved them in most cases, be it us or the Chosen of Yip of Yore. Which is a bit of a problem, as every single remaining planet has already been claimed by the other Chosen, even if they have yet to kill the Prima Guardian there."

Everyone nodded as Jake also noted this recent strategy Eil'Hakan and the Holy Church had begun to deploy in the last month or so. As the number of planets remaining dwindled, Eil'Hakan and his allies began to leverage their superior forces more actively, as they began sending diplomats and scouts to planets to create an initial relationship with native worlds before the real firepower would arrive.

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This had led to a few clashes between people from Earth's alliance with Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church, but nothing too bad, as they were in this odd limbo of not really wanting to outright battle, seeing as no one was exactly sure of on how bad terms they really were. This meant the decision of who would help was up to the natives, and in most cases, they preferred the people sent by Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church, even if someone like the Sword Saint had arrived and could solve their problem by himself. The old man had even found himself in a situation where he ended up still killing a Prima Guardian so he could use the Vessel to teleport back home, but that hadn't made the natives change their mind, as they'd stuck with the Holy Church and even given them partial credit for the Sword Saint's efforts.

All in all, Ell'Hakan and the Church had definitely been the winners if one counted the number of planets claimed, with Jake's weakened state and the loss of the Fallen King not exactly helping the matter. Even if the two of them had been actively helping kill Guardians, it was questionable Earth and their allies could have won, as the Holy Church had truly proven themselves experts at convincing neutral planets to join them. The concept of life after death was simply too tempting of a benefit that no one could compete with.

"Thank you, Kindroth, and even if they don't seem in a rush, it's a matter of days, not weeks, when the last Guardian falls," Miranda said, getting the focus back on her again. "And this leads us to the primary topic today... what now? Soon, there will be no Prima Guardians left, and we have no idea what will truly happen, but we have good reason to believe that some form of communication will open up with other universes once the last one falls." R

The good reason to believe this was gonna happen being Jake's gut feeling in this scenario.

"That means we need to consider not just the thoughts of mortals but what the gods might be planning," Miranda continued, looking around the room. "This galaxy never asked for this, but we need to recognize the Milky Way has already become the battleground of the gods long ago. Records have gathered, and the sheer number of powerful individuals alone should be proof of just how much focus has been put on our small galaxy. This also means that the divine factions who have already gone to great lengths to take root will be less than inclined to leave again... quite the opposite."

Miranda's words were emphasized strongly by the people in the room. Everything from the Dao Sect to the Void Gods had representation, with most Primordials and several large divine factions with people on Earth alone. If one took the entire Milky Way and counted all the gods who worked with Yip of Yore and had blessed people to help Ell'Hakan... the number of gods directly involved had to be in the hundreds, if not over a thousand. Many only had their own small planet and were allied with Yip of Yore, but they still had a presence and interest to expand.

"Historically, this is the time when the gods will begin to mobilize a grand expansion," Miranda kept going, primarily explaining things to the people with no powerful divine connections to understand their situation. "Fighting back against these larger factions is quite frankly not an option, and no one really has any choice but to align themselves with some major faction. I'm not saying this to force anyone into anything, but simply stating how things are."

"Excuse me... but is there really no world where complete autonomy can be retained?" one of the World Leaders present asked. A woman who Jake heard represented quite a few planets and had been one of the people from a world who'd defeated their Prima Guardian on their own before getting into contact with Kindroth.

"Usually, a galaxy will not be entirely swallowed up, with some regions left unclaimed, but as things are right now, I see no scenario where a single habitable planet of the Milky Way Galaxy is left alone," Miranda sighed. "But do allow me to assure you of one thing. We remain entirely uninterested in actually conquering the galaxy. We do recognize that we will have to place it under our influence, but there is no intent to actively control every planet."

"So we would become vassals whether we like it or not?" the woman continued questioning, clearly not happy with the situation. Understandably so, which was why Jake didn't throw her out of his lodge despite being a bit curt and rude.

"I wouldn't use that term, but some form of official relationship where you will be under our banner will be established," Miranda said. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves yet. We are far from reaching a point where such official designations are in any way relevant. For now, we shouldn't focus on what everyone here wants, but what those we share our galaxy with wishes to accomplish."

Miranda proceeded to explain some of what she had prepared, including some stats and some maps copied from within the Prima Vessel, showing the many planets of the Milky Way, and rather than simply having the colored flags, they now showed alignment. The situation was more complicated than just having those on the side of Jake or Ell'Hakan, though.

Factions like the Court of Shadows, Dao Sect, and many others weren't truly part of this conflict. Even Valhal wouldn't usually get involved in a matter like this, and no matter who won, they would more likely than not remain with a powerful presence in the Milky Way. Even if the Holy Church somehow conquered everything, they wouldn't push out these neutral factions but allow them to keep a foothold.

This also meant that Caleb and Eron wouldn't directly get involved in the conflict between Jake and Ell'Hakan. They truthfully couldn't, as they represented their factions and had to remain neutral despite their personal feelings.

Valhal and the Risen were pretty damn involved, though. Valhal because of the shady stuff going on, and the Risen because of the Holy Church. They had already left Earth once, but they were still floating around in the Milky Way and really didn't want the Holy Church to end up with too much influence, lest they be hunted down. So, even officially, they were on the side of Jake, courtesy of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" logic.

As for Vesperia... it truly didn't matter much to the Endless Empire, who claimed a galaxy. More often than not, the Hive Queens would be forced to leave, but not even the Holy Church wanted to needlessly make enemies with the powerful ectogamorph empire. In many cases, they even assisted the Hive Queens in leaving before claiming their planets, only adopting violence if they saw no other choice.

Miranda had also talked to Jake earlier about her strategy for this entire meeting. At first, she had considered focusing a lot more on Ell'Hakan and his intentions, but she quickly learned that the Holy Church was a far better target.

Earlier, she'd talked about history, and if there was one faction with a historical track record of swallowing up entire galaxies and forcefully replacing any leaders who didn't bow down to them, it was the Church. Many of the World Leaders who'd joined Earth had done so not because they wanted to ally with them but because they didn't want to be crushed under the holy boot of the Church and believed Jake's side had a better chance of allowing them to remain in charge of their own planets – a sentiment Miranda had gladly confirmed once more during this meeting.

The meeting continued, as Jake primarily sat back, waiting for this part to get over so he could get to the section he really cared about where they would really discuss the future of the galaxy. The more he heard, including some parts about what Ell'Hakan was up to, he only became more and more assured that no matter what, one thing couldn't be clearer:

The Chosen of Yip of Yore had to go... and he only became more and more certain that he would have to throw some holy trash out alongside the fucker.

The wind blew through the barren land as sand was whipped up and formed small whirls. A few smaller critters had begun to inhabit the land once more over the last few weeks as the land slowly recovered courtesy of the Planetary Core fixing the planet.

A mammal about the size of a rabbit was digging through the ground, looking for anything left behind as it found what looked like a piece of bone. If Jake had been there, he would have recognized it as a piece of the Fallen King's ivory claw, but all the small creature saw was something that could potentially be valuable to consume.

However, just as it moved to bite down on the claw, it stopped itself. The hair on its back stood up straight as it turned tail and ran away as its instincts screamed at it to escape, and just in time, as behind it, the dirt around the claw fragment began to lose its color and turn monochrome.

Chapter 988: The Most Important Question...

Jake didn't envy Miranda and Kindroth, who both had to convince a bunch of World Leaders that they would get crushed by superior forces, forcing them to submit to someone no matter what they did, and of the options available to them, Earth was the better choice.

Many World Leaders who didn't actively engage with divine factions still didn't fully understand the influence gods had on the new world and the sheer power these massive factions held. Especially not those who hadn't gone to Nevermore themselves. They simply couldn't imagine just how powerful a creature that could crush galaxies in the palm of their hands truly was. Even Jake had a hard time imagining it, and he had seen and experienced a vision of an S-grade Valdemar and Villy battle, where the mere shockwaves from their clashes could have destroyed planets if it had happened in a space not suited for their fight.

Miranda seemed to realize that trying to sell them on beings capable of blowing up their planets with a flick wasn't realistic, so she would go with something far easier to imagine: sheer, overwhelming numbers. In the Milky Way right now, after dealing with the event, planets had only a few billion inhabitants in most cases, with many falling below a billion and others going far beyond that. With time, most inhabited planets would balloon to hundreds of billions, if not trillions, due to increased space from them all growing in size with the integration and the longer lifespans of everyone. That is unless some kind of population control was established, as the Records of planets could be diluted if there were too many born and living there, but it rarely tended to be a problem.

Anyway, the point was that everyone could see population numbers trending upward, especially should the galaxy enter a peaceful period. So, if a single planet could have that many people... how many could an entire galaxy have?

How about a galaxy cluster?

A supercluster?

The number of inhabited planets was an unimaginable number in every universe... and there were ninety-two other universes out there, some larger and some smaller than the ninety-third. People couldn't imagine the sheer scale of the multiverse, but they could understand the basic concept that a faction spanning ninety-two – working on the ninety-third - universes had to have quite the army.

And soon, the ninety-third universe would begin to open up. These forces would be able to enter their universe, and no matter how much a planet tried or how good they thought they were, there was just no way they stood a shadow of a chance.

As Miranda had said, perhaps things would have been different if they had been in another galaxy. There were many instances where no one necessarily claimed a planet, even if they were aware of it, but just let the natives be if they were considered too weak to bother with or too resistant to recruitment. However, due to the sheer Records of the Milky Way, nothing would be left untouched, and everyone had to pick a side at one point or another.

The entire meeting ended up taking way too many hours for Jake's liking as they went through topic after topic. After everyone seemed to understand that a side had to be picked, discussions around mutual defense were instantly raised, alongside skepticism that the Order of the Malefic Viper that backed Jake would truly stand against the Holy Church and Ell'Hakan.

Anyway, this was the reason Jake had to be in the meeting. Miranda's foresight of what people would say was always scary, and she had gone as far as coach Jake on a little speech should this topic be brought up, as he taught the ones lacking multiversal common knowledge another basic lesson.

"I'm not going to argue against the Holy Church having far superior numbers. Neither am I going to deny that the Holy Church and Ell'Hakan have far more planets than we do under their influence. If you

compared the standing army each could represent, they would definitely outclass us three-to-one if not even worse... but so what?" Jake began as he stood up. Energy began to gather in his surroundings as an arrow of arcane mana appeared, and Jake reached out and grasped it.

"A single one of these arrows could easily kill a thousand of their so-called army."

Nine more arrows appeared. "Ten thousand."

Followed by that also getting increased tenfold.

"A hundred thousand dead... do you need me to go to a million?" Jake asked as he allowed his aura to spread, as his arcane mana bathed the room. He saw the uncomfortable faces of the World Leaders, and he let his mana linger for a moment before retracting it and continuing.

"You all seem rather stuck in the past, caring so much about who has the larger army despite how utterly irrelevant it is. The fighting power of a faction is no longer determined by their numbers. Half the people in this room could wipe out all life on a planet on their lonesome, with no army able to stop them. It doesn't matter if you throw a million weaklings at them... all you're accomplishing is wasting lives and potentially a bit of their time."

It was true there were methods for numbers to be an important factor, namely through means deployed by factions such as the Holy Church or Endless Empire, but even that required someone powerful to be in charge, and there were limits that simply couldn't be overcome. Jake simply didn't believe that any number of D-grades, no matter what they did, could ever stand a chance at killing him. Also, even if they did... Jake could just not fight them and go straight for the head of the hydra and kill every leader of influence in the faction he was aiming to take down.

"Think about it. While the Holy Church may be powerful, why do you think the Malefic Viper and the Holy Mother can both be recognized as beings standing at the pinnacle of the universe? Why do you think no one has dared make the Order of the Malefic Viper an enemy, even during the absence of the Viper, simply due to the fear he would return one day? It's because of the sheer personal power of a Primordial," Jake continued as he glanced across the room.

"More often than not, the true power of a faction is not determined by its size, history, or achievements but solely by who rules it. Who its strongest member is. The Order of the Malefic Viper would simply be a shadow of its former self should the Malefic Viper fall or prove too weak to cement his position as a pinnacle being," Jake said, purposefully giving Carmen a knowing look. "There is a reason no one has even tried to declare war on Valhal. They have proven just how powerful their leader truly is time and time again. Valdemar does not hold the title of Wargod and wide acknowledgment as the strongest fighter in the multiverse for nothing, but is someone with such overwhelming proven power that even if he had no faction at all, he would still be an unbeatable one-man army."

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Jake got a few weird looks from this statement where he praised another Primordial that much as he continued. "Anyway, my point is, while we may have a smaller force than Ell'Hakan, we are certainly not weaker. While he has more fighters, I truly believe the quality of ours is superior. Oh, and should it come down to a direct clash between myself and the Chosen of Yip of Yore... I don't see myself losing."

No one in the room seemed to have any objections to this statement, as Jake had proven himself superior when it came to combat prior. He had "won" in their only direct competition in the form of Nevermore, and the other Chosen had never fought Jake directly, despite Jake's clear message that he was more than willing to have a bout. Of course, with recent strategies and schemes, Jake couldn't actively ask to fight the guy all the time... but the fact that Ell'Hakan had avoided Jake when they were actively in conflict before Nevermore did add some weight.

Miranda took over for Jake after his display of power, as the more boring part continued. After a few more hours, things were finally coming to an end. A lot of discussion had been about redistribution of resources and helping the planets who needed aid after dealing with their Prima Guardians, which really didn't interest Jake that much.

But, sometimes, boring stuff just had to be done, and they had accomplished their primary goals of this meeting. Their first objective had been to convince the other World Leaders they should back Earth and not Ell'Hakan, while another was to make them more comfortable around other races. Casper had spoken during the meeting and made the position of the Risen clear, flaunting his status as someone blessed by the Blightfather while making clear there were no plans of some massive undead takeover. Vesperia had also briefly shared the stance of the Endless Empire, but honestly, the World Leaders didn't at all comprehend the significance of a True Royal, so it didn't add that much. The Sky Whale also spoke a bit for the monsters and how maintaining an ecosystem of beasts on the planets was important and whatnot and how coexistence was the best choice.

Now, there was one more objective that Jake had a good feeling was also a success. As the meeting ended, Miranda dismissed everyone with a final short speech, as she stayed behind with a few others. These were the people Jake wanted to have the real meeting with. People in-the-know of the complicated situation with Ell'Hakan and all their scheming. This meant Caleb, Casper, Maria, and many others had to leave due to their relationship with major factions. It wasn't that Jake didn't trust them, but that he didn't want to put them in a situation where they felt stuck between their loyalty to Jake and responsibility as a representative of their factions.

The only outlier was Carmen, who was allowed to stay. Miranda naturally also stayed alongside the Sword Saint, Sylphie, Vesperia, William, Arnold, and Sandy, who only joined now for this part of the meeting, as the giant space worm had successfully avoided taking part in the boring part of the meeting. William was there because he already knew the situation wasn't as it seemed, and while Vesperia did come from a large faction, she held a position that didn't require her to ever report anything.

After making sure it was only them in the lodge through his sphere and making sure the formation kept everything said confidential, Jake looked at Miranda. "Do you think it was convincing enough? Too on-the-nose?"

"Maybe a little, but it can also help sell your genuine admiration of the Wargod," Miranda said with a smile. "Besides, you didn't say anything that was untrue."

This had been their final objective... because one of the invited World Leaders had been a spy Miranda had identified with the help of William more than two months ago. It was someone they knew for a fact reported back to Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church, and by now, they were likely already on their way back to their own planet to tell the Holy Church what had happened during this meeting. The guy had tried to hide it, but karmic magic was just too damn overpowered.

Anyway, what Jake had said could easily be interpreted as him actively saying he only respected the Malefic Viper because he held the title of someone powerful, and if that was proven wrong, he would more than gladly jump ship. At the same time, Jake had recognized that Valdemar was more than just a strong reputation, but a warrior who had undergone countless battles to prove his power.

In the eyes of someone already suspecting Jake could be convinced to switch sides, one could easily read between the lines and see this as a message that Jake was just waiting for Yip of Yore to make a move and prove the Viper indeed wasn't as strong as he claimed. To be clear, Jake didn't at all believe he would influence the actions of the god, but maybe this could help make Ell'Hakan not suspect Jake was planning to soon go on the offensive.

The fact Jake was making sure to have his own large faction and World Leaders under his banner could also easily be interpreted as a negotiation tactic and a way for him to increase his value should he end up joining Valhal or another faction. That, and it was only natural for a powerful leader to increase his own influence.

Jake wasn't sure Ell'Hakan would read that far into it, but Miranda seemed pretty sure he would, so Jake just trusted her and went along with her plan. Hopefully, it all worked out, and the guy didn't suspect that Jake and company were considering switching gears... assuming the others were on board, and he could talk to Villy soon and ensure he wouldn't mess up anything for the god.

With everyone else gone, Jake took a deep breath as they all knew he had been planning something.

"Am I the only one who's tired of all this?" Jake asked the room. "All this scheming behind closed doors and deceit to hide our true thoughts and feelings."

"What are you getting at?" the Sword Saint asked, getting straight to the point.

Jake took a moment as he looked at the floor before sighing.

"I realize have been way too fucking passive regarding Yip's Chosen. From our very first meeting, Ell'Hakan has always been the one issuing the challenges and the one planning out our encounters. Sure, I got one over him at Nevermore, but the second we were back here, it felt like I was caught in his tempo once more," Jake began, having had plenty of time to reflect on the conflict.

"For a good while, I wondered why I hadn't even tried to be more proactive, but recently I realized... I just didn't really want to deal with him. He's not the kind of opponent I enjoy fighting. I think the reason why he sees me as an enemy is stupid in the first place, and he can't just be normal and try to kill me like a normal person but has to spin all his stupid stories rather than just show up in front of me," Jake continued in an annoyed tone.

"His Path is dumb, and he is a pain to deal with... but I now know I really don't have a choice if I want to deal with him or not. He's going to keep being an annoying asshole until I put an arrow in his forehead. Without him, this Desolate Child of Loss wouldn't have existed. Without him, Earth wouldn't have been invaded... and without him, I wouldn't have to attend a bunch of fucking boring meetings discussing how to deal with his schemes. So, the reason I called this meeting is to make a proposal to stop scheming. To

find an opening and exploit it to go straight for the jugular. All his tricks, all his deceit, all of it will disappear with his death.”

Miranda looked at Jake with uncertainty. “This is quite the radical shift in approach... and with the Holy Church now openly backing him, things are even more complicated, and-”

“Then stop making them complicated,” Jake said. “Killing an enemy isn’t a complicated concept. Killing those who seek to defend your enemy isn’t a complex concept either.”

The Verdant Witch fell silent for a bit as the Sword Saint spoke. “I’ll be honest... I’m surprised it took you this long. I half-expected having to convince you not to instantly use the cross-galaxy teleporter to invade Ell’Hakan’s homeworld.”

“So you’re opposed to taking more proactive actions?” Jake asked the old man.

“I’m not saying that,” the swordsman smiled. “I’m just saying that you can’t go at it too simple-mindedly. You will need some form of planning to get to Ell’Hakan, and you need to ensure his support network is dismantled or, at the very least, disrupted before you attack. Finally, have you considered perhaps the most important question...”

The Sword Saint leaned forward and looked Jake in the eyes.

“What if you’re not capable of killing him?”

Chapter 989: To Lock Down One's Enemy

The atmosphere in the lodge turned cold as Jake returned the Sword Saint's gaze. "Are you saying I can't beat him?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all," the Sword Saint sighed and leaned back. "But I do believe you consistently underestimate how powerful Ell'Hakan actually is. He didn't take the second spot on the Nevermore Leaderboards because he was a good schemer. He didn't manage to battle and earn the recognition of Valdemar's Image in Nevermore through words and deceit. He did it as a warrior, and while he is certainly the slimy sort who loves schemes and spinning stories over direct confrontations, I don't believe he is someone you can take lightly once cornered."

"I'm aware he's powerful," Jake said. "But that doesn't mean I'm not confident."

"What it does mean is that you need to go in with a good plan to ensure the battle plays out how you want it to," the Sword Saint said as he turned to Sylphie. "Let me ask you something, Jake. Do you believe you could defeat Sylphie in a battle?"

"Yes," Jake answered, earning him an angry – but not disagreeing – peck.

"But do you believe you could kill her if she sought to do everything in her power to survive?" the old man followed up.

Jake frowned and thought about it only for a moment before answering. "Well, I obviously wouldn't want to cause her any real harm, but if I had to lean into your hypothetical scenario, then I wouldn't be able to kill her easily without her escaping. However, I do believe I would win in endurance, so while it may take some time, I should be able to eventually catch up and claim victory."

"What if she runs to that frost elemental Wintermaul and teams up with him? What if I, Vesperia, Sandy, and Arnold all choose to take her side and also seek to impede you? Would you then be able to kill her?"

"Yeah, yeah, I get what you're saying," Jake sighed.

"Good," the old man said. "There is no way Ell'Hakan doesn't have a plethora of failsafes and trump cards to save his life should he ever be in deathly danger. He also has many allies. So, if you're truly aiming for his head, you need to do it when the situation is right. You don't just have to be powerful enough to beat him; you have to be capable of killing him without allowing his escape. And that's a lot more complicated than just being the stronger party."

Jake hated that the old man was right, but in his defense, Jake had considered this already. This conversation did make him think, though... Jake didn't really have any way to properly lock people down for a long period of time. He could disrupt space with his destructive arcane mana, and he could temporarily freeze someone, but he had no way to stop someone with powerful escape skills from just running off.

"I get it," Jake relented. "This is part of the reason I would like to strike sooner rather than later. Once the universe opens up again, allowing him to escape to other universes, I see no good way to take Ell'Hakan down. I don't believe he has many allies capable of protecting him in this universe, but the same isn't true in the wider multiverse."

"True, true," the Sword Saint nodded. "Now would be an opportune time to strike as long as you find some way to lock him down to at least a singular planet. Limit his pool of allies and potential escape paths."

"We can't do anything before communication opens up, though," Miranda chimed in. "You will definitely have to discuss all this with the Malefic One and get a green light to go ahead."

"Yeah, for sure," Jake said, Carmen also having said the same thing prior. Oh, and speaking of the Runemaiden: "Hey, Carmen... will you have to ask Valdemar – or more likely Gudrun – their thoughts on the matter?"

"Not sure I'll have to," she shrugged. "Probably even better that I don't contact them at all. I will have to leave the planet before anything goes down for sure, though. Reasonable deniability and all that. It will have to look like I wasn't in the know and that Valhal didn't support this at all. Maybe we can even make it look like there was some disagreement or something."

"I think the Viper will have more insight on what's best to do there," Jake said, a bit unsure. "But, yeah, the Sword Saint had a good point; I'll need some way to lock him down and not make it possible for him to escape easily. A way to lock down space or something."

Arnold, who hadn't really been part of the meeting at any point, suddenly spoke up with a suggestion. "Have you considered using a Voidsphere?"

"I'm not sure where we would even get such a thing," Miranda sighed, clearly knowing what the scientist was talking about.

"Can we even get any as C-grades?" Carmen also questioned.

"Ree?" even Sylphie chimed in as Jake sat there, staring at them, confused. He exchanged a glance with the Sword Saint and found himself relieved when the old man clearly also didn't know what a Voidsphere was. Luckily, Miranda noticed the two of them and explained.

"Voidspheres are one of the best ways to not only stop someone from escaping but having a fight that others cannot intervene. Also, gods battling in the actual universe usually leads to catastrophic damage, which is why they tend to instead clash in the void. There, they can't break anything, and no one is put at risk besides the ones fighting. From how I understand it, the Void Gods noticed this trend and began offering these Voidspheres that could be used to create a temporary void zone once used, and more than that, they would seal those inside for a period once the void zone was established," Miranda explained.

"Last time I checked, mortals can't exactly survive within the void," Jake pointed out.

"You never truly make contact with the void," Arnold picked up Miranda's explanation to flaunt some of his knowledge of the void. "A Voidsphere creates a boundary that seals within it a small interpreted representation of the immediate environment once used, creating what many compare to a separate space or dimension resembling the real world, but nothing more than a mirror of the real world. Once the Voidsphere runs out of energy, the boundary will naturally fade once more, and the void zone will remerge with real space once more, leaving not a single mark of its usage."

"So, to summarize, you create a fighting cage for you and anyone else nearby when you use it," Carmen simplified Arnold's explanation. "Breaking out of one is super fucking difficult. From what I was told, when using the most powerful Voidspheres, not even the strongest of gods can escape in a short period of time, and as these void zones are still separate from the actual void, they even prevent gods from fleeing to their divine realms. There really wouldn't be anything better if you want to take down Ell'Hakan."

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"Damn... where do you get these Voidspheres?" Jake asked, looking expectedly at Arnold.

The scientist returned his gaze and shook his head. "I do not have any currently, and I'm uncertain of my abilities to create one capable of sealing in the Chosen of Yip of Yore. However, if communication with the wider multiverse does open up, I shall commune with Oras."

Jake frowned a bit. "I guess it's worth a shot... but why did you bring it up as if we could easily get a Voidsphere? Aren't they rare?"

"Extremely so," Arnold answered. "Creating one usually requires the corpse of a Void Dweller, with the power of the Voidsphere dependent on the power of the Void Dweller used. The version I would create would be nothing more than a weak simplified imitation that is far less capable but should still have potential."

"... again, why did you bring them up?" Jake asked again.

"Perhaps someone had one," Arnold answered nonchalantly.

"From where?"

"It could have had my sources," the scientist just answered.

"Pretty sure you can't bring items like that from other universes, so..." Jake muttered.

"I'm well aware of that," Arnold responded.

Jake, knowing he was getting nowhere, turned his attention elsewhere. Because this topic did make him have a thought. "The Court of Shadows must be frequent customers of these Voidspheres, or do they have some other way to stop people from running away?"

"The Court of Shadows has its own version where instead of the void, they use the shadow realm to lock away a section of reality. We can't involve them in this matter, though, so we have to look for another solution," Miranda shook her head.

Thinking on the matter some more, Jake believed that perhaps their best chance was a Voidsphere if Arnold could somehow make one. If not, they could always try with a classic formation. The problem with formations was that they were stationary and usually took quite a while to set up, and Jake had a hard time imagining a world where he could lure Ell'Hakan into one. As for making a formation disc or something to have one that could be rapidly deployed... yeah, Jake didn't believe he was good enough to do that, and formations like that tended to be far weaker.

"I'll think of something, but see if any of you can find a solution, and if you manage to make one, Arnold, I will definitely owe you big time," Jake said, as he moved on with the conversation as he turned to William who had been silent so far. "What do you think? About everything?"

William, clearly surprised Jake asked his opinion, took a moment to gather his thoughts before answering. "I can't really offer much when it comes to killing Ell'Hakan, but I do think you have to consider what surrounds him. He grows based on the bonds he's created and has armies of faithful who would gladly give their lives should anyone go after him. Isolating him won't be easy, and while his allies cannot measure up to the two of you, they cannot be entirely overlooked. Also... I may have an idea how to make him less likely to flee."

"I'm listening," Jake said as he raised an eyebrow.

"Ell'Hakan relies heavily on the Legacy of Yip of Yore to grow in power, using stories to amplify himself to get as strong as he is now. His legend is his Path, so what if you did something that could severely hurt his Path? What if you damaged his legend and the story he's built for himself?"

Jake was listening as he was beginning to understand what William was getting at, especially with what he had been up to during the time Jake and others were in Nevermore: he wanted Jake to go after the believers on his planet.

"He has spent his entire life, way before the system, carefully curating his false legend on his homeworld. They truly believe he is a godlike being without any rival," William continued. "So what if you break that legend?"

"I thought you said their belief was utterly unshakeable?" Jake questioned. "That even if I beat him, it won't do shit as they are too deep in the sauce of delusion."

"There are more ways to combat a story and discourse than arguing and proving it wrong..." William said, obviously not fully comfortable with what he was about to suggest. "If there's no one left who believes in a legend, does the legend truly exist?"

And some-fucking-how, they were back to discussing planetary sacrificial rituals. Or, in this instance, it was more accurate to call it a planet-corrupting ritual. The worst part was that Jake had already considered something similar himself. Not that he was going to admit that openly.

"Perhaps destroying an entire planet just to bait him into fighting you is going a bit too far..." the Sword Saint muttered.

"I don't believe it is," Vesperia decided to also join the conversation. "From how these fanatical believers of El'Hakan have been described, they sound more like faithful drones of a hive rather than independent and free-thinking creatures. What do you think will happen when someone kills their king? That they will simply accept his death and move on? I find it far more likely they will strive for revenge until put down. Getting rid of them first seems like the most logical order of things. If it succeeds, it, at the very least, helps weaken the Chosen, and even if all it does is force him into a fight, that, too, can be considered a win. I see no obvious downsides to this strategy."

The Sword Saint clearly didn't like the suggestion but didn't say more as he mulled on her words. Jake also sat silently for a while as no one spoke.

"I guess we can't really do much before you discuss things with the Malefic One..." Miranda said after a while. "Only make preparations should you get the go-ahead."

"Right," Jake nodded. "Can you work on making a list of the hyper-faithful he's gathered? It may be a good idea to also target some of those at the same time I go for El'Hakan. Also, if avoidable, we shouldn't get into a direct confrontation with the Holy Church and their forces. With how much influence they already have in the galaxy, not being able to find a more peaceful way to make them fuck off or at least only get their own little corner of the Milky Way would be extremely annoying."

The others nodded, and Jake finally also turned to Sandy. "I may need your help when it comes to actually taking him down. If we have to chase him or something, I could definitely use a ride."

"Sure, sure," Sandy agreed, not really having cared about this meeting at all, but instead subtly used all this time to steal every single banana off the musa outside the lodge using space magic.

There really wasn't more to be said after that. They stayed a bit longer to discuss some details, including other potential traitors on Earth and the people they needed to keep an eye on during this period, but honestly, Jake felt pretty certain that Ell'Hakan had no idea anything was being plotted against him from Jake's side.

After another hour or so, the meeting was adjourned, and everyone left to return to their own matters and to prepare. Everything had to be done slowly and steadily and without raising suspicion, but they didn't have too much time. If all things went well, they would make their move the second the Viper gave them the go-ahead. Maybe they would delay a bit if Arnold said he could get a Voidsphere ready, but if not, Jake had been working on something on his own already.

He'd been thinking for a while about the best way to take someone like Ell'Hakan down. Not just him, but anyone powerful, really. Jake knew that his Path was on the simpler side compared to someone like Ell'Hakan, so with a thought process truly in line with his Path, he had been working on a little something during this period of weakness.

Jake knew that his most powerful strike in the battle was pretty much always the first one. Protean Arrow, alongside all his other bonuses from Stealth Attack and whatnot, were all just ridiculously powerful, especially after Lone Hunter helped boost everything even further.

So, he'd thought to lean even further into that.

Down in his lab beneath the lodge, Jake went into a large room where he'd set up some extra barriers of his own to stabilize the space using his arcane energies, allowing nothing to leak. Entering it slowly so as to not disturb the energies within, Jake went toward the center of the room where a long object was floating.

It was an object resembling a Protean Arrow but still only halfway constructed. It was more complicated than anything he'd made prior, and the reason wasn't the mana itself but what the mana surrounded. Because encased in the Protean Arrow Jake was constructing, a black spear-like weapon floated, giving off curse energy even in this stabilized space.

Jake was happy to see the structure he'd constructed still hadn't fallen apart yet, and that Eternal Hunger continued to not prove a problem even while summoned outside his body for this long. He still had a bit to go, but he still couldn't help but smile as an end was in sight to do something he'd hoped to make for a long time:

The Supreme Eternal Hunger Arrow of Instant Death.

... name still a work in progress.

Chapter 990: Arrow Crafting: Nightmare Difficulty

Jake carefully studied the mana structure surrounding Eternal Hunger while taking some mental notes and getting himself into the right mindset to continue his research. As mentioned, he had been actively working on this for several months, but in truth, he had been wanting to do something like this ever since the day he first made Protean Arrow. No... earlier than that. Ever since he got the Sin weapon.

Eternal Hunger still had a problem even after it became mythical rarity, though: it remained strictly a melee weapon. This likely came to be because of the weapon's Origin and how he'd made it in the first place. He had altered a melee weapon in the form of the transforming chimera weapon from Yalsten, and these properties had clearly been kept and only further empowered.

The majority of Sim-Jake's Records merging with the weapon also hadn't helped, as Jake's alter ego had been nearly solely focused on melee combat in his final days, only further cementing Eternal Hunger as a melee weapon. Jake had consulted the description many times during the last few months, and he

couldn't help but bite onto the same thing time and time again... not once did it specify Eternal Hunger could only be used as a melee weapon:

[Eternal Hunger (Mythical)] – A weapon born of eternal hunger - a living sin of consumption, forever starving, forever seeking sustenance. Given form by the [Redacted] Hunter, this new myth still holds properties of its Origin as a weapon created by vampires from the core of a Chimera, allowing it to change shape and adapt to the will of its master. Origin has been further altered by [Redacted], giving birth to the Eternal Shadow of the [Redacted] Hunter. This weapon is eternally Soulbound to its creator; their souls are one and the same, making Eternal Hunger indestructible as long as the Hunter persists. Any attack made with this weapon will absorb energy from the target. Foes slain by the owner of this weapon will have their souls absorbed. Can consume absorbed souls. Take pride as you wield hunger incarnate. Enchantments: Curse of Eternal Hunger. Souldrinker. Soul Consumption. Eternal Shadow.

Requirements: Soulbound

Looking at the description carefully, one could even argue it should be possible to make Eternal Hunger into an arrow without any problems as the weapon adapted to the will of its master. He also knew some aspects worked when not in melee. The Souldrinker enchantment of Eternal Hunger worked on anything he killed, even if he never took out the weapon during the fight. Eternal Shadow could also be used at all times, and shit, his Eternal Shadow was made up of curse energy and could shoot with a bow and arrow.

Eternal Shadow did give one clue that what Jake was trying to do wouldn't be easy, though... because while the Eternal Shadow was made of curse energy, the arrow it shot would still be of arcane energy, and it was only when it attacked in melee it used an exact replica of Eternal Hunger.

That didn't mean Jake had given up, even if it seemed like an arduous task to use Eternal Hunger as a ranged fighter, and ever since he got the weapon, he'd continually experimented with it.

Jake had naturally tried to make Eternal Hunger into a bow way back, but it wasn't made for it. And not just because he couldn't turn the black malleable metal into a string, but because none of the properties of Eternal Hunger worked if he used it to shoot something. Yes, Jake had tried to "shoot" things using Eternal Hunger by pretty much just using it as a catapult of sorts, but that hadn't worked at all. The system wouldn't recognize Eternal Hunger as a bow, even when he made it into one and tied a string himself, so it was back to the drawing board.

The thing is, Jake wasn't the type to give up and had kept trying other things, only to get instantly roadblocked at every turn.

He'd once upon a time thought that perhaps the solution to this was easy enough: just turn Eternal Hunger into an arrow and shoot that... but that obviously hadn't worked. If not, Jake would have been doing that all along. It had several problems, with the first one pretty obvious and why, perhaps even if he could make it into an arrow, it wouldn't be that good of an idea: Eternal Hunger took time to change shape.

Usually, it took him several minutes to transform Eternal Hunger from one weapon shape into another, and that was while he focused intently on doing so. The weapon was malleable, but it was more like shaping liquid metal than playdough, and it took focus and time to do it properly.

One could probably easily spot the problem with Jake then trying to shoot Eternal Arrow like an arrow: he wouldn't be able to use it as a melee weapon afterward. Jake had naturally instantly recognized this as a challenge and did have some considerations to alleviate the problem, but one thing at a time. Because he had one way

bigger problem with his current idea:

Eternal Hunger couldn't be transformed into an arrow.

Not to misunderstand, Jake could transform it into the shape of an arrow. He could make it look like a perfect metal arrow, big or small, and even make an identical copy of his Arcane Arrows just with Eternal Hunger... but it still wasn't an arrow. At least not in the eyes of the system.

Needless to say, this wasn't a good thing. Nearly every single one of Jake's ranged fighting skills wouldn't work if what he shot wasn't an arrow. The system instead recognized Jake shooting Eternal Hunger akin to if he had just thrown the weapon. While having a mythical rarity spear thrown at you could do some damage for sure, it was nothing compared to even a regular arrow shot by Jake.

This was the primary issue Jake was facing when it came to making his upgrade to Protean Arrow, but also the reason why he was trying to make a fusion of Protean Arrow and Eternal Hunger in the first place. He recognized that he couldn't make the system recognize Eternal Hunger as an arrow, but what if he could make it recognize it as just another ingredient that made up an arrow?

He already knew he could use Eternal Hunger as a catalyst and power source when doing alchemy, meaning it wasn't solely a weapon and that the system had some flexibility. Was it really too much to ask to have it also qualify as an ingredient in a Protean Arrow? Jake sure didn't think it was.

Referring to his research notes – because, yes, Jake actually felt the need to take notes to help jumpstart his memory of all the shit he had tried - he saw notes on his attempt of wrapping Eternal Shadow to a Protean Arrow with mana strings before and how that hadn't worked. He had also tried making a simple shape and put Eternal Hunger inside of it, but once more, no dice.

So, he went to something way simpler to try and prove a concept. First, he took a dagger. Definitely not an arrow, right? Then, he took a stick. Still not an arrow. From there, he tied the dagger to the stick... didn't quite work to make an arrow. However, when he made some more modifications, such as making it more aerodynamic, reshaping the blade a little bit, and putting it all together, suddenly he had an arrow.

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What's more, when he took it apart again, the dagger returned to being recognized as a melee weapon, showing it was possible for something to change based on what it was combined with. However, he knew it likely had something to do with the Records of an object and how the system recognized it, which was proven right when he tried his same little experiment with enchanted items.

One tended to amplify the Records one wanted when making a magical item. Why would one bother using some of the innate Records of a dagger to also make it a good arrow? No, it was better to focus the Records solely on the weapon's identity as a melee weapon to make it stronger where it was intended to be used.

However despite his challenges, Jake did find some success. Rather than Eternal Hunger itself, he'd several times constructed an arrow filled with curse energy, but his biggest breakthrough was when he transmuted a cheap spear by filling it with the Sin curse. It had definitely been a spear, and the system recognized it as a melee weapon with Fangs of Man, and when he tried to shoot it with his bow, it hadn't counted as an arrow, so it definitely hadn't been considered one.

Yet he managed to integrate it into a Protean Arrow after only a few hours of work. He had carefully constructed a formation inside the shell of the arrow, borrowing from his experience in the Nevermore Challenge Dungeon heavily. It hadn't been his best work, but in the end, he managed to somehow push it over some threshold where it recognized the cursed spear as just part of an arrow and not an arrow by itself. All it had been was a power source for the Protean Arrow. One part of a whole.

To make things even better, the spear actually amplified the power of the arrow due to its far more durable form, courtesy of not being made of pure energy. To make it clear, it didn't actually help him create an overall more powerful Protean Arrow to use a shitty common-rarity transmuted spear with it, as he had to spend too much time and energy on making the two compatible. But, it proved the concept, and Jake was certain that should he make an arrow successfully integrating Eternal Hunger, it would be far from weak.

It wasn't something that could be done quickly, though. Jake had tried using the same method as with the common-rarity spear, but it had instantly failed. The problem wasn't the idea itself but the power of the formation and Protean Arrow. The skill and how he used it simply wasn't powerful enough to integrate a mythical weapon, so after a long time of consideration and testing, he landed on what he was currently doing:

Making the shell for the arrow... one tiny step at a time.

With Eternal Hunger as its base, Jake had very slowly begun to form the Protean Arrow around it. He did so from the bottom up, which was why the structure looked only half-complete. It had been three weeks since Jake began doing this, and the work to create the arrow was indeed long and arduous.

Hunkering down, Jake slowly got back to work in earnest. The space where he made the arrow was kept incredibly stable at all times to make sure the in-progress formation was kept intact even when Jake wasn't there, and as he began to work on it, he loosened up the surrounding area where he would keep making the formation.

With a careful touch, he began extending the stable arcane mana he used to inscribe the formation, giving him a bit more space to work. Runes were also being infused into the surface of Eternal Hunger, once more stabilized by his arcane mana to not have the weapon absorb the energy. He needed to ensure that the arrow itself could tap into the powers of Eternal Hunger, but not the other way around, as he wasn't looking to just feed a curse that could never be sated.

For the next hour, he worked intently as arcane energy now covered nearly a centimeter more of Eternal Hunger than when he started while still remaining stable. His mana was rapidly being drained, but a mana potion kept him going as he kept making the most complex formation he'd ever made in his life. Every single inch of Eternal Hunger would be covered in arcane energy that was infused with layers of runes and tiny magic circles, interlinked using the concepts of the Protean Arrow.

This was truly the only way Jake saw to have the Protean Arrow overcome Eternal Hunger. In pure energy and power, Eternal Hunger far surpassed anything else Jake had, so if he wanted Protean Arrow to be capable of making use of the mythical weapon, he needed to boost its Records by doing something else. Complexity was the most obvious answer and, thus, the one Jake had chosen.

All he was doing was hoping to hit that mysterious and unknown threshold where the system decided his efforts were good enough. He just needed one good push for Protean Arrow to upgrade in the direction of allowing him to encompass and use Eternal Hunger.

He also knew he only really had one good shot at this. Right now, the formation was naturally still only a work in progress and entirely dormant, and he would only know if his plan actually worked the second he activated the formation.

One could compare it to Jake currently making a large circuit board... scratch that; he was making an entire modern computer, except he couldn't run any power through it before everything was fully complete. Should he have fucked up too badly anywhere along the way, the moment power was turned on, the entire thing could be fried. Or, perhaps even worse, it wouldn't be able to do the job he needed it for.

Staying with the computer metaphor, it was as if he needed the computer to hit a certain performance level. Should the computer be too bad, it wouldn't be able to run the program it was created for, and even if it didn't outright crash, it would certainly damage itself while proving Jake simply wasn't capable of making something able to do the job properly.

The only good thing about this kind of work was that Jake had been able to do a lot of it while injured. Now that he was fully healed, he could speed up a bit, and as he got comfortable and more confident, his construction speed also got faster.

This entire project honestly reminded Jake a bit of one of the Puzzle Cube challenges, and the gift from his Chosen ceremony definitely helped Jake make this happen. His mana control had always been impeccable, and now it was better than ever as he kept focus as more and more of the Protean Arrow took shape.

Hours passed, as Jake had to take intermitting breaks to recover mentally and restore his resources, with even these breaks there to theorize and write down the next part of the formation he had to create. The shell of the Protean Arrow had a total of five layers in most places, with each layer containing its own runes and magical scripts.

The entire structure had a spiral construction of sorts, with every layer directly connected to one another somewhere or another. Countless mana strings also functioned as bridges between the different layers, despite there only being a few millimeters between them in most places, with even these mana strings filled to the brim with small runes.

In surface area alone, this formation was utterly massive, especially when you took its small size into account. Mana-wise, the Protean Arrow would contain dozens of Jake's full mana pool once he was done, and in truth, with just how much he'd already improved Protean Arrow just doing this process, he was confident in an upgrade... but he didn't try to push for one yet. Not before the arrow was complete. Jake knew he skipped many steps and pretty much reached for the top from the get-go.

One thought had struck Jake during the meeting earlier regarding Ell'Hakan. They talked about how to trap him and prevent his escape... but was any of that necessary if he didn't even get the chance to run? If the very first opening arrow dealt lethal damage, even if it couldn't outright kill him, significantly weakened him and made him unable to put up a proper fight afterward?

No matter what, how could he go wrong with making his opening strike even stronger?

He just hoped he could finish this project before communication with the rest of the multiverse opened up once more... and with every passing day, he kept working on the Protean Arrow. His feeling it was soon time only grew, especially when he got a report from Miranda that now only three red planets remained in the galaxy.

With there being two merely a day later... and only a single one remaining not even a full day after that.