

The Primal Hunter

Chapter 951: A Gray Flag

Olliandra sat in the clock tower, contemplating the final words of the Chosen as well as the entire conversation before it. His warning at the end was also pretty clear in intent: reconsider aligning yourself with Ell'Hakan. In fact, she should reconsider if she wanted to align their planet with anyone if she could avoid it. Olliandra felt like a conflict was definitely brewing, and having seen the power of the Viper's Chosen, she didn't want to fight against him. On the other hand, she also didn't dare risk making the Chosen of Yip of Yore an outright enemy. This was a conflict far beyond what she or anyone else should get involved in, and her biggest hope was that they could watch it safely from the sidelines.

She also felt embarrassed she hadn't realized he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper when he introduced himself. In her defense, she hadn't gone to see the Leaderboards even after finishing Nevermore. Only the space mage and a few others had decided to check it out, primarily to see if the Celestial Child – or Ell'Hakan, as it was perhaps more proper to call him – had achieved a good placement. Seeing those Leaderboards was mostly for vanity, after all, as she had never expected to meet anyone who would appear on it outside of Ell'Hakan.

After hearing the mention of emotional manipulation, she also felt a bit more suspicious than before as she looked at the space mage. "You have attended several meetings with Yip of Yore's Chosen present without me... can you lend any validity to him having a Bloodline capable of swaying emotions?"

The space mage, who had long been her most trusted comrade, looked deep in thought, seriously considering her question before answering: "The fact I cannot outright deny it frightens me. Reflecting on my own impression of the Celestial Child, I do find myself questioning my own emotions on the matter. I cannot logically place why I felt such respect and reverence toward him. He is powerful, yes, but my own emotions do feel unnatural in retrospect. I cannot say for sure if this is due to some level of manipulation or if I simply acted irrationally, but I would veer on the side of caution."

Olliandra was a bit taken aback by the response. She had honestly expected him to say that he hadn't noticed anything and that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was just trying to make them view Ell'Hakan more negatively due to his own personal bias. For quite a while, the mage had been a big fan of Ell'Hakan, talking about him being a great leader of the alliance and definitely the one to unite their galaxy under one banner.

However, now he looked full of doubt. Olliandra also admittedly believed Ell'Hakan would have been the one to unite them, but now she doubted that was going to

happen... and if it did happen, it wouldn't be through a peaceful expansion of the alliance and every planet choosing to align themselves with him willingly.

"What do you think our approach should be to these Chosen?" she chose to ask him.

"For now, we should address the Prima problems and claim the Planetary Core," the space mage said. "When it comes to the two Chosen... we are already considered part of the Celestial Child's alliance on paper. Trying to at least probe what a relationship with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper would look like seems wise. Perhaps sending a delegation to this planet Earth could be considered. If it's discovered and we are scrutinized by the rest of the alliance, we can always claim we did so because we were fearful of what would happen if we didn't, or even excuse it as an attempt to gather information on a potential foe."

"That strikes me as risky," Olliandra responded. "Trying to play both sides may result in us simply making both view us unfavorably. What's more, if Ell'Hakan can truly manipulate emotions through a Bloodline, there is a big chance he can easily see through lies or deceit. I also would be cautious about trying to deceive the Viper's Chosen and his faction... from what I heard, many talented individuals are aligned with him, some of which may discover any underhanded intentions."

"Would it perhaps then be best to do nothing?" the space mage asked.

"No..." Olliandra shook her head. "It's unquestionable that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper saved our lives and our planet, while Ell'Hakan and his alliance did nothing, not even send a representative to hear us out. To not at least try to repay such a favor wouldn't sit right with me. While it won't be much, we will send a delegation to his planet and try to offer some token of our gratitude. If that ends up aligning us with him over Ell'Hakan... then so be it."

Olliandra couldn't help but think what would have happened if she hadn't so stupidly chosen to release the Prima Guardian, which led to all this... and she genuinely couldn't tell if this was a better outcome in the long run.

She also didn't know who would win between the two Chosen. All she knew was that while Ell'Hakan and Lord Thayne were both considered peak geniuses of the multiverse... she had only seen one of them shatter her perception of what a C-grade would be capable of.

Jake finally discovered the first of the special privileges granted by the otherwise entirely useless ring he'd been rewarded with while in the Prima Vessel. After he'd left the clock tower, he had headed back toward the teleporter that could eventually take him back to the inter-galaxy teleporter. However, he came to learn all of that wasn't necessary when the ring suddenly gave him some instinctive knowledge when he considered getting back to Earth.

His ring turned out to have the ability to teleport him back to the Prima Vessel on Earth. It wasn't some instant teleportation, but Jake had to channel energy into the item for a bit over five minutes as it slowly formed a teleportation circle beneath him before finally triggering and taking him home. While that wasn't as convenient as instant teleportation and could even be slower than the "official" way in some instances, it was still pretty damn neat, and it meant Jake didn't risk getting stuck on a planet.

Anyway, that's what Jake did, as he was whisked through space and returned to Earth again, not even a full day after he left in the first place. Appearing back in the room within the Prima Vessel, he startled some poor space mage he didn't even recognize who was scribbling down some of the runes of the magic circle, likely at the behest of Arnold or someone else trying to figure out more about how these teleporters worked.

Jake gave the guy a quick nod before he headed off to quickly talk to Miranda about what had transpired on the planet he'd totally forgotten to even get the name of. As a pleasant surprise, a teleportation circle that had seen set up right outside the Prima Vessel, connecting it to the rest of the planet. He knew they had a bunch of quick-to-set-up circles ready, but it was still good to see they had placed one at the Vessel to make travel easier. This update is available on [movel**fire**net](#)

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While leaving the Prima Vessel, he saw Arnold busy in one of the rooms, with dozens of mages running around. He even saw Sandy inside a room, and he considered going in to say hello but decided not to. Again, he'd not even been gone for a day, and they looked very busy.

Arriving back in Haven shortly after, Jake made his way to Miranda who was back in her office, looking just as busy as Arnold. The perfect time for Jake to stop by and drop some information on her. When he entered the building, he got a few surprised gazes, and when he knocked and entered her office, she also looked up perplexed.

"I thought you had gone to assist some extremely desperate planet?" she asked, a bit confused.

"Oh, I did, and they were very desperate indeed. The World Leader decided she and her allies could totally take on the Prima Guardian on their own. Spoiler warning: they couldn't. Ended up killing the Prima Guardian and talking a bit with the World Leader. Things went pretty well if I say so myself, and..."

Jake quickly gave an overview of what had happened and explained what he had talked about with Olliandra, as well as what he inferred about Eli'Hakan from their conversation. Miranda seemed pleased enough with how Jake handled things, though she did find his final comment a bit questionable, as threatening them wasn't necessary in her eyes, though she doubted it had done much harm.

They also talked about Jake's fuck-up when he introduced himself as Thayne – though Miranda did add that Jake really had no reason to try and hide his identity but should just flaunt it if he so wished. His identity as Jake Thayne, that is. When Jake expressed his surprise the World Leader hadn't realized who he was earlier, considering the Leaderboards and all that, Miranda was far from as surprised.

"That is one thing you need to consider when you visit these other planets... so far, you've been used to interacting with individuals already familiar with the multiverse. People from Nevermore or large factions. Those blessed by gods who at least bestow some level of understanding upon their subjects. However, these are in the vast, vast minority in the multiverse. From here on out, chances are the ones you meet know nearly nothing besides what they potentially learned at Nevermore or second-hand from friends. Perhaps they only have some surface-level knowledge about twelve Primordials existing, but that's it," Miranda explained, Jake nodding along.

"I also noticed that the information they had seemed a bit... biased," Jake added.

"Because much of it likely stems from Ell'Hakan or others in the alliance who were originally told by him. While I wouldn't say it's a safe assumption to make, I do think it's very probable that the vast majority of multiversal knowledge these members of the Prima Guardian Alliance have is given by Ell'Hakan. I would expect most of what he's given them to be true, but only to hide the half-truths and deceit more easily. Also, I will add that even if they haven't been told lies by Ell'Hakan... it isn't hard to believe that the Chosen of someone called the Malefic Viper isn't the nicest guy and doesn't have your best interest at heart. Let's not pretend like The Viper is known as some altruistic being, so no one would expect his Chosen to be some hero."

"Well, good, because I'm not," Jake shrugged. "I'm hunting down Prima Guardians purely out of selfishness. Potentially saving a few planets in the process is just a happy little coincidence."

"Yeah, maybe don't outright state that. At least let people be under the illusion you truly moved with intentions of saving them and that you genuinely care for the betterment of the galaxy," Miranda sighed.

"I did call it a happy little coincidence," Jake pointed out with a smile. "If the choice is between killing two Prima Guardians, and killing one will save a bunch of people while killing the other won't, I'll go for the first one."

"That's good enough, I guess," Miranda said. "I would also just continue to call yourself Thayne or Lord Thayne or whatever. Just avoid introducing yourself as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Make it clear you are more than the rumors compel them to believe and that you are acting as the World Leader of Earth, not the Chosen of a Primordial. If they don't connect the dots while you are there but only learn of your identity later... great. That will just confuse them and contradict what they've been fed by Ell'Hakan. If

they do figure it out, do something similar to what you did here and have a calm discussion about Ell'Hakan if they initiate it. If not, no need to even talk about the guy."

Jake nodded along, taking in her words. He still sucked at politics in his own eyes, so any advice he could get was more than welcome. There was one thing about this entire scenario that did make him question what he was currently doing, though. One Miranda's question about helping out people sparked.

Why did they even need to be on good terms with the other planets of the galaxy in the first place? Why was it a problem if Ell'Hakan managed to claim the entire alliance for himself? Just because it made the other Chosen stronger? Even if that was the case, Jake genuinely believed Earth alone could face down the rest of the galaxy single-handedly.

Alright, In truth, he did know the answer. If they just let Ell'Hakan roam free, there was a good chance they would one day be put in a scenario where they would have to fight the rest of their galaxy. However, that wouldn't benefit them in any way, either. In fact, all that would do was leave them with a barren galaxy with a bunch of ruined planets and potentially a lot of enemies, as there would definitely still be survivors from all those planets split across the multiverse. Then, there was also the fact it would help Ell'Hakan spread the story that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was a maniac who destroyed his own galaxy, but Jake honestly didn't care much about that anymore.

Either way, it would be better if Ell'Hakan just never managed to unite the galaxy. Jake also didn't see much sense in just letting the guy do as he wanted if they could stop it. Plus, he and the others did genuinely want to hunt down Prima Guardians, so it wasn't like they lost out by making a few friends and allies along the way.

As he had said to Miranda, if he had the choice, he would prefer to save as many planets across the galaxy as he could. Assuming it didn't cause any harm to himself and those he cared about, that is.

After he and Miranda spoke a bit more, she sent Jake off once more to try and save more planets from their big bad Prima invasion. Before he left, Miranda had even given him a new message to paste into his applications to hopefully get a better acceptance rate. He wasn't a big fan of how it read, but he could see how it would work better... even if it was kind of lying:

"High-level hunter seeking to assist in slaying Primas. Would prefer to operate alone. Spent the full duration in Nevermore and is confident in taking down Primas solo if necessary. No compensation is required, acting solely to increase rewards from the system event."

Perhaps saying it was kind of lying wasn't entirely correct either... Prima Guardians were technically Primas. The rest of it was also true. Alongside this small blurb, it also contained some other information and what looked like a letter of recommendation from

Miranda. All in all, the message was a lot longer, far more so than Jake believed necessary... but if it helped him get to kill more Primas, then so be it. All he needed the message to do was bring him to the planet, not like they could forcibly remove him once he was there.

Getting back to the Prima Vessel once more, Jake headed inside and went straight to the teleporter and the big map showing all the available planets.

Jake quickly looked at the map as he saw it. All the usual flags for planets were there. Red for those fighting the Primas without the alliance, green for those who had already dealt with their Guardian – with the one he had just visited now marked green - and blue for those part of the Prima Alliance. However, now there was a new color.

One of the flags had turned gray. One of those that had been red before. When Jake focused on the flag, he saw what the color meant:

The first planet of the Milky Way had officially fallen to a Prima invasion.

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Chapter 952: A Bright World

It was inevitable not all planets would survive this system event, especially not the planets that chose to face the event alone. On Olliandra's planet, Jake learned that some World Leaders had truly become drunk with their measly power, believing themselves capable of things way outside their capabilities. She had just been lucky that she had only gotten too overconfident after also deciding to join the alliance.

The planet that had fallen was one that wasn't part of the alliance, so it wasn't even as if anyone could have saved it, even if they wanted it.

One of the first things Jake checked was the information provided by the system that gave a general overview of the planet. What he saw wasn't very positive. According to the report, the number of enlightened people still alive was a bit less than a million. A meager number for an entire planet.

Next up, he checked something else: the possibility of teleporting there. However, as they had not been part of the alliance, they had never received or created the teleportation circle provided to those part of the alliance. They naturally also hadn't claimed the Prima Vessel either, meaning there was no easy way to get there... at least not without the teleporter Arnold was working on.

Jake also considered for a moment what would happen on the gray-flag planet now. The Prima Guardian would have gained its second key and gone to claim the Planetary Pylon, and once that was done... Jake wasn't entirely certain what would happen next.

If the Prima Guardian was like the two other ones he had seen, it would die by itself after some time due to the instability of its soul. When that happened, the planet would be left in the hands of the Primas. It was also a good question if they would remain Primas after the event ended. Perhaps they just wouldn't be able to have offspring that was also considered Primas, meaning the variant would die with them, and in only a single generation, the planet would be dominated solely by beasts and monsters, many of which had Prima parents.

With the Prima Guardian claiming the Planetary Pylon, the Pylon would also be transformed back into simply being a Planetary Core. For the planet itself, this wouldn't matter, all it did was reduce the value of the planet for any enlightened who wished to claim it. If this reversal to a normal Planetary Core happened after the Prima Guardian died, Jake wasn't sure.

All he knew was that monsters couldn't claim and control Planetary Pylons. At least not usually. It required a certain level of nobility title to do so, and since monsters couldn't get nobility titles, they couldn't claim it. Well, the King was an outlier, but he was also literally a Unique Lifeform, so him having unique circumstances shouldn't come as a surprise.

This isn't to say that claiming a Planetary Core wasn't valuable to a monster. One could just look at the Ghostvine on the moon that had claimed the moon's core that wasn't even a real Planetary Core. The core was a wellspring of pretty much infinite energy and a top-tier natural treasure for any monster that claimed it and slowly absorbed its energies to grow. The only downside of a Planetary Core was that it was really hard to move around, and moving it would often end up ruining it.

While thinking, Jake even began to theorize part of the reason these Prima Guardians were even a thing was to make sure the Planetary Pylons were turned into Planetary Cores should the planet lose during the system event. However, even if the Pylon was turned into a core, that didn't mean all enlightened died, right?

Let's hope the remaining survivors can survive till the planet potentially opens up or until Arnold finds success... maybe the regular Primas aren't as aggressive toward people after the Planetary Pylon has been claimed... for their sake, I hope that's the case, Jake thought, though he knew it was very hopeful thinking.

This was the risk one faced if they chose to take on the Prima Guardian alone. It was scary to consider that the choices of one incompetent World Leader could doom an entire civilization in such a direct way, and Jake was happy he had chosen to divvy out any such responsibilities and decision-making. Oh, and that when he did make unilateral decisions, he was at least strong enough to back up his own choices.

Then again... perhaps that is also what the now-dead World Leader of the fallen planet had believed.

Shaking his head, Jake focused on helping out where he could actually do something. He began quickly checking out planets to apply to, and shortly after, he found one that seemed worth visiting. Having actually read the descriptions, this one mentioned the World Leader's intentions to face the Prima Guardian as soon as they believed they had gathered a powerful enough force, and they were recruiting anyone willing to join them from the galaxy. No mentions of Ell'Hakan anywhere, either.

In fact, it mentioned that it was open for debate for people to be able to stay after the event, with even offers of high-ranking positions up for grabs. All of this seemed great, and the planet seemed interesting, but one thing caught his attention more than anything else... the population.

A hundred and seventy-two billion people.

That was more than twenty times the people Earth had before the integration, with that number lower now due to the many deaths. Sure, in the future, Jake didn't doubt their population would balloon, especially with how big Earth was now, but for a planet to have this extreme population numbers now must have meant they had a huge population before the system.

He did question why they didn't believe they had a big enough force to face the Prima Guardian with that many to choose from, but he would probably learn why shortly if they accepted him.

Applying to the planet, Jake waited for a few minutes with nothing happening. Sighing, he began to look for other places to go instead, but just then, a notification appeared, informing him his application had been accepted. He had been a bit worried his title as World Leader would prove a problem, but luckily that wasn't the case. Newest update provided by novel●fire●net

In fact, maybe it even proved to be a boon.

Using the teleporter, Jake was whisked through space across the galaxy for the third time that day. Luckily, the teleportation was always instant, as his vision only turned black for less than a second before he found himself standing on top of a large teleportation circle. Through a Pulse he immediately released upon arrival, he saw he was within a large dome of metal, not unlike the one Arnold had made. This dome was placed in the middle of nowhere, as only pure wasteland could be seen all around.

The teleporter itself was in a room in the center of the dome. Jake also quickly noticed that this wasn't the only one. Several teleportation circles were placed on different floors on top of one another, seemingly all linked together somehow. As he arrived, he saw three people walking toward him. All of them were elves, wearing similar white and gray

robes, with the woman in the middle having a slightly more elaborate robe with two men at her side wearing simpler ones. Yep, definitely a clear sign the woman was of higher rank than the two dudes.

"Greetings, hunter. Or should I say, World Leader," the woman said with a smile as she approached. Her way of greeting made it clear she had fuck-all idea who Jake was besides the information he'd given.

"Greetings," Jake responded with a nod. "I believe my application made my purpose for coming clear?"

He had added a little extra in there besides what Miranda had given him.

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"You wish to join the team that will take on the Prima Guardian. However, before that, allow me to invite you to the Council Estate, where you can receive the proper welcome of a World Leader," the woman said. "Do not worry. The team for the Prima Guardian is still being assembled as we are hoping more capable mercenaries will appear."

"I assume this Council Estate houses the current leadership of this planet?" Jake asked clarifyingly.

"Certainly. Rather than rely on the judgment of a single World Leader, we have chosen to adopt a council to make more informed decisions in unison and to ensure the unity of every country," the woman answered. "I am sure the council will be more than happy to explain further once you arrive."

"Not that dissimilar to my world, then. We also have a council of representatives," Jake said, getting an approving look from the woman. Jake saw no reason not to at least make himself a bit more relatable by sharing minor details like that.

The three elves proceeded to escort Jake out of the large metal dome that Jake assumed was constructed for safety should a troublemaker arrive. Toward the outer edges of the dome, teleportation circles were set up to take people elsewhere on the planet, one of which they quickly went to and teleported to the capital city.

Now, Jake had wondered why so many planets had been medieval before... it turns out far from all of them were. Perhaps the metal dome should have been a clue, but the moment he appeared in the capital, he was overwhelmed by what he saw. He was also practically blinded.

Massive highrises filled the skyline, and every single building gave off an intense white light as if coming from a far too powerful LED. The entire city was bathed in this white light, making it look even more sterile than it already did, considering every single

building was also white, amplifying the light. Everything was just white on white, with the most daring colors off-white or gray here and there. Oh, and they really loved reflective surfaces.

"Interesting architectural choices," Jake commented as he was led unto a floating disc that would transport them to the Council Estate. Naturally, the disc was also glowing.

"Others have made similar comments," the elven woman responded. "We simply choose to embrace the light. There are many cultural, historical and religious reasons for this I will not bother you with, but our post-system logic is the increased appearance of young ones with the light affinity."

"I see," Jake nodded. That... kind of made sense. Exposing people a lot to one affinity could lead to it appearing in them, especially children. So, living in an environment filled with intense light energy would help if that was something they wanted. As for Jake, who decidedly did not have the light affinity, it was just annoying. Luckily, his high Perception allowed him to easily filter out the light enough to still see without any problems.

After flying through the high-tech planet for a while, they arrived at a massive building with several glowing spires on top of it. It was naturally the Council Estate, and Jake was led inside to meet with the council. On the way through the city, he saw millions of elves, all wearing similar clothes, and he really wanted to question what kind of society they were building but began to feel like there were a lot of... cultural issues that could pop up if he asked too many questions.

Better to just focus on the Prima Guardian. If Miranda then decided establishing positive relations with this planet was worth it afterward, so be it.

Inside the Council Estate building, Jake finally saw people who clearly weren't from the planet. The building was large enough to have several wings, and within one of these wings, he saw about fifty people, all within different private rooms. Some of them were together in small groups, while others were alone, and all wore various equipment and were of multiple races. It was definitely the other mercenaries the planet had recruited so far to fight the Prima Guardian.

"How many mercenaries have you recruited so far?" Jake asked while they walked.

"A few hundred, with most of them out there fighting the Primas along with the armies," the elf responded.

Jake nodded as they continued to walk in silence until they reached a large semi-circular meeting room. Within, Jake saw quite a few people already gathered, while he saw magical constructs occupying other spots. Clearly, they were waiting for his arrival, and the escorting elf motioned for Jake to enter, which he promptly did.

The room's design was pretty interesting in that it didn't use height to place the council members higher up than anyone visiting – a very popular design choice that even the system used during the World Congress.

Inside, Jake found himself standing before twenty-nine elves who were there in person and exactly fifty who were there only as projections, likely because they were busy elsewhere. Again, that made sense, seeing as they had a Prima invasion to deal with.

"Greetings, World Leader," one of the elves who were there in person said. "I am the representative of sector nineteen and shall serve as the speaker of the council for this meeting. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I go by Thayne; it's a pleasure to meet you all, too," Jake nodded in greeting as he quickly did a scan of the room and noticed something a bit odd. While he couldn't see the levels of the projected elves, he did see the ones of the elves present, and they were all surprisingly low. Not a single one of them was even above level 230.

Perhaps this was also why no one reacted when Jake introduced himself. He had very much expected at least one of them to recognize who he was, but nope.

"This may seem a bit direct, but may I ask why another World Leader has chosen to volunteer himself to help another planet fight their Prima Guardian? Much less why he has decided to do so on his lonesome?" the representative asked Jake.

Honestly, that was a pretty legit question, as it definitely was weird for a World Leader to act like Jake did. As for how he would answer, he saw no reason to lie.

"I have already led the forces of my planet to slay the Prima Guardian and all other Primas and now seek to hunt down more Prima Guardians as per the event to increase my own reward," Jake answered, finally getting an emotional reaction from the people there as a lot of their facial expressions warped for a moment. Some with shock, others with disbelief, and quite a few with suspicion. Again, pretty fair. So was the next question.

"Truly?" the representative asked. "To have completed the event already on your planet is truly impressive. If almost a little unbelievable."

Jake just looked up at the council member, not answering, prompting them to continue.

"How are you affiliated with the one who calls himself the Celestial Child?" the speaker questioned, and from the tone, Jake instantly inferred these people were definitely not allied with him.

"I'm not," Jake simply answered. "I would also like to turn that question back on you. How is this planet related to him?"

"He attempted to have us join his course, but by the guidance of the Great Bright One, we chose to reject such propositions," the council member and speaker answered with a bit of disdain in their voice.

Jake wanted to ask about this Great Bright One right away but chose not to do so immediately. Instead, he nodded and asked some more general questions about how the efforts against the Primas were going and about the planet in general.

What he did do was use Identify a few more times. Usually, Jake didn't look for Blessings, as the more he tried to see with Identify, the more likely its usage was to be detected. However, this time, he made an exception and...

[Elf – lvl 214 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

[Elf – lvl 219 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

[Elf – lvl 217 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

[Elf – lvl 215 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

Clearly, a god had a great hold on this planet. But, again, Jake chose to not pry too much. Who their Patron was shouldn't matter too much if all he wanted to do was kill the Prima Guardian.

After Jake spoke with the council a bit longer, they seemed satisfied enough, as the speaker smiled.

"If you are truly as capable as you claim, would you be willing to prove it to us? Before we take the massive risk of activating the Prima Guardian, we will need some kind of assurance," the elf asked.

Jake nodded, seeing no reason not to reject this. "Very well."

"Great," the representative smiled. "The attendant waiting outside can take you to one of our battlefields where you can prove your prowess. If the general approves, we can proceed to engage the Prima Guardian afterward."

"Sounds good," Jake said, relieved that the process of convincing them seemed quite simple.

"Irrelevant to your performance, we also see opportunities for diplomatic relations with your homeworld and would love to send a delegation once things are concluded here," the speaker continued. Jake nodded once more, feeling pretty good about how things were going. He had even managed to do some good politicking.

"I'm certain we can figure something out," Jake responded, as he asked something he could perhaps come to regret. "Now, if I may... could you tell me a bit about the Great Bright One you mentioned?"

"Hm? This is surprising; I would have thought you had heard the divine one, seeing as you are not related to the heretic who calls himself the Celestial Child," the speaker responded in a casual tone, still not hiding their disdain for Ell'Hakan. "But allow me to enlighten you about the Great Bright One, the Creator of Light and Life and maker of the system itself."

Oh... oh, great.

Yep, this pretty much confirmed it. Jake was dealing with a delusional cult.

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Chapter 953: It's Hard Being This Weak

Maybe Jake was a bit hypocritical for calling the Great Bright One believers a cult, considering he was part of a faction that worshipped a giant snake god. Then again, the Malefic Viper's organization was called an Order. Did he have a cult in the past? Yes, but now he had an Order, so it wasn't the same thing.

As for how he would deal with them... time would tell. Jake wasn't going to be antagonistic for no reason, though. Before he decided what he would do, he definitely needed some more information.

"I must admit I'm not that knowledgeable about this Great Bright One," Jake said, as he tried to be a bit careful with his words. "But you said you expected me to know, considering I am not related to the one who calls himself the Celestial Child... what do you mean by that?"

The speaker seemed to confer with the others in the room for a moment before she answered. "This Ell'Hakan follows a god by the name of Yip of Yore. That in itself is no problem, but he has taken a rather fanatical approach and believes his god is superior to all others despite only having risen to godhood through the grace of the system made by the Great Bright One. To work with such an individual who is so deep in his delusions would be difficult for us. Don't misunderstand; belief in the many gods of the multiverse and ignorance of the Great Bright One is not an issue, but someone who so blatantly disregards the Great Bright One isn't someone we would want to work with."

Alright, so they do acknowledge the existence of other gods... man, this is weird.

"I see," Jake slowly nodded.

"Might I ask, seeing as you do not know of the Great Bright One, what does your planet believe in?" the speaker asked curiously. There didn't seem to be any malicious intentions behind the question, so Jake answered truthfully.

"People are allowed to believe in whatever they want on my planet, as long as their beliefs do not cause harm to others," Jake said. "Perhaps there are even followers of the Great Bright One."

He seriously doubted it, but he couldn't really know, now could he?

"Do you personally follow a god?" the speaker continued.

"No, not really," Jake answered with a shrug.

What? Sure, he was the Chosen of Villy, but Jake wouldn't say he "followed" the Malefic Viper in any way. Jake was more of a freeloader who yinked some Records and enjoyed all the benefits like the good little heretic he was.

"If you want to, I'm sure the Voice of the One would gladly speak to you about the Great Bright One. Ah, the Voice of the One is the one who holds the title of World Leader here on our planet," the speaker said, finally also speaking about the World Leader.

"Is the World Leader not on the council?" Jake asked curiously.

"He has an honorable position where he offers advice and input, but he rarely makes use of the powers bestowed upon him as the World Leader and trusts the council for all decisions. His participation is limited, though, as his role as the Voice of the One requires him to focus on listening to the guidance of the Great Bright One. However, I'm sure he would spare another World Leader some of his valuable time if you desire a meeting," the speaker explained.

"Does he communicate with the Great Bright One even now?" Jake asked, trying to act impressed.

"Of course. The Voice of the One has been in communion for the past day to discuss when we are ready to face the Prima Guardian," the speaker said in a revering voice. "His communion should be done by the end of the day, and we shall inform him of your arrival then. Until such a time, let us proceed with having you prove your prowess and capabilities to face the Prima Guardian. Let me also be transparent that we require more of you than the average mercenary, as we cannot in good consciousness risk your death, considering your identity as a World Leader."

“That’s fair,” Jake nodded, as he believed he didn’t really have more to discuss with the council for now. He did have a lot of questions, but he chose to not ask any of them as he saw no reason to risk turning them hostile. At least not before he met this Voice of the One.

“Thank you all for this meeting; it was very enlightening,” Jake continued and couldn’t help but make a small pun. “I wish you all well. I shall now go see how powerful these Primas of your world truly are.”

“May the light of the Great Bright One guide your Path,” the speaker said with a bow, Jake nodding in acknowledgment as he walked out of the room. Outside, the attendant who had originally brought him there was waiting, and based on how her face had changed at times throughout the conversation he had with the council, she had definitely heard everything they said.

There was a lot to take in. Clearly, this Great Bright One had a firm hold on the population of the planet, and they all held unswayable faith. Yet they also didn’t seem hostile or even like they expected Jake or anyone else to believe the same thing they did, though they did expect people to recognize their beliefs. Clearly, they also knew of the existence of other gods. It was all just very weird, and Jake hoped the Voice of the One could shed some light on the situation. If not him, then maybe the attendant who was waiting for him.

Exiting the conference room, the attendant naturally stood ready and bowed in greeting. “I hope your meeting with the council proceeded well. I will admit I heard most of what was said, including that you are to prove your power by slaying a Prima. Do you wish for me to lead you to one of the battlefields immediately? I have one in mind, commanded by our top general. If you impress him, his word will hold more sway than anyone else’s. Besides that of the Voice of the One, of course.”

She said the last part jokingly, as if it was a given. Jake responded by nodding, agreeing to her proposal. “Please lead me there.”

With an enthusiastic nod, the elven attendant led Jake away from the Council Estate, seemingly in a better mood than when they arrived. She was also a lot more talkative on the way through the city as they headed for the military’s teleportation center – because, apparently, they kept those separate from the civilian ones on this planet.

Jake tried to probe as much as he could to learn more about the planet and the Great Bright One, even playing the part of an interested potential believer at times. The elven attendant gladly answered everything and volunteered much information Jake hadn’t even asked about. Jake knew she was probably trying to make the planet seem a lot better than it actually was, but it all sounded kind of... nice?

He had called them a cult, but he didn’t really hear anything cult-like outside of their looney beliefs. They didn’t force people into particular Paths like the Holy Church either

or required absolute obedience and faith. Based on what Jake saw when he scouted with his Pulse, everything also seemed to track with what the attendant said. What was the most surprising was that people were allowed to freely leave without any problems, with a lot of people having chosen to do so, especially those who went to Nevermore. Of course, Jake couldn't confirm these people chose to leave, but the attendant didn't seem like she was lying.

The only real crime Jake would say the planet committed was being weak. Because he really didn't see a lot of powerful people. After they teleported to the frontlines and Jake saw the so-called top general of the entire planet, this was further cemented.

[Elf – lvl 270 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

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Sure, his level wasn't atrocious, but he was weak. Jake didn't feel any threat from the guy, and compared to the World Leader Olliandra on the last planet, this guy really sucked... and it wasn't even like she was that strong either.

There was one thing, though. For him to reach that level, he had to have gone to Nevermore, right? Jake wondered how the extreme beliefs of the ones on this planet meshed with that. Jake could understand people leaving, but when he did a few scans here on the frontlines, he saw many who had gone to Nevermore. Really odd.

Jake had lots of questions, but he'd chosen to save them all for the Voice of the One. For now, he was there to prove he was strong enough to help with the Prima Guardian.

"Ah, you must be that solo World Leader I heard about," the general said when Jake entered a large temporary building that looked like it was made out of white plastic and plexiglass.

"That would be me," Jake confirmed. "I heard you have some Primas for me to hunt?"

"That's quite the understatement," the man chuckled, stroking his blonde beard. "We have managed to funnel them into this area pretty well with different lures and scouting teams, making this the single-largest battlefield on the planet for regular monsters and Primas both."

"How many have you slain so far? Primas, that is," Jake asked curiously.

"Based on the newest report, eighty-six. Mainly the more speedy types who got here from the Prima Vessel first. We make use of their differing speeds to not get overwhelmed with too many at a time, and so far, it's working," the general explained.

Jake nodded, having also done a few Pulses to see the base camp and some of the battlefield. Things were honestly pretty well organized, especially when one considered

the massive advantage this planet had: pure fucking numbers. Jake wasn't even talking about C-grades here. They had millions of D-grades also helping in this war, primarily serving to help amplify magical formations or defensive barriers. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT movel.fire.net

"Just point me to the Prima you want dead, and I'll handle it. Alone. My Path allows me to land incredibly powerful blows from stealth and then leverage that into an advantage, using a bow," Jake said, explaining a bit of his Path. It wasn't like he would have hidden this part anyway, and he saw no harm in telling the general to earn some trust points.

"Alright... sounds like you would do well against mage types," the man nodded. The table in front of him changed as a 3D map was shown of the nearby battlefield. A section of it was highlighted, as the general explained. "We got one such Prima in this area. Hidden pretty well, and very annoying when it shows up. It also seems a lot more intelligent and cautious than most other Primas. It was one of the first to arrive, but the problem is that every time we tried to move in on it, it retreated to recover, only to return shortly after to unleash a few skills. It has done this four times so far and has caused a few thousand casualties already."

"Sounds like a good target," Jake agreed, a bit impressed with the Prima for acting like that. Were the ones on Earth also that smart? C-grades did tend to all be smart, so probably? Chances are, the ones on Earth never had the chance to show off just how bright they were due to dying too fast.

The general seemed pleased as another 3D model appeared, this one showing a thin, kind of humanoid creature that looked like the mix between a jellyfish and an octopus. At least it had a mix of feelers and tentacles instead of arms and legs, with a few also just extending out here and there from its body.

"This is the newest scan we have of it. It possesses space magic and some form of force magic we believe. Perhaps just a derivative of space magic, our data is inconclusive on that front. Our original plan was to prepare a team of rogueish fighters to take it down, but if you can do it, that would be more than welcome," the general continued.

Honestly, all of this was unnecessary, but Jake chose to act as if this was all critical information as he nodded along. He wanted to learn more about what was going on with this planet and this Great Bright One, and Jake was pretty sure proving himself *too* strong could make that very hard.

That's why he had decided to prove himself strong but not overpowered. He would also make it look like he was a one-trick pony who only really had the strategy of landing powerful blows from stealth and then just shooting a few more arrows afterward, hoping it would be enough. Alright, that kind of was his strategy most of the time... moving on.

After a bit more briefing, the general was suddenly interrupted as some magic message seemed to arrive. "New attack incoming... and it looks like your target may also be on its way based on our scanners."

"I'll get set up right away," Jake nodded.

"Be aware I will have a scout keep an eye on you during all this," the man noted. "She will keep her distance to not reveal your position, but we naturally need someone to witness and attest to your abilities."

"That's only to be expected," Jake agreed. "I'll head out. Good luck on the frontlines."

"And good luck to you," the general nodded. "May the Great Bright One bless your quest."

Jake simply nodded and headed out to take down the Prima. On the way out, he got a mini projector thing that could show a map of the battlefield, and it was even live-updated with the estimated position of the Prima he was to kill.

Honestly, it was all some impressive tech, and Jake felt like Arnold would have liked things on this planet... though he would probably also think they were simplistic and didn't have enough void magic.

While making his way forward, he also briefly made eye contact with the scout who was to keep an eye on him, the woman not trying to hide what she was doing. Jake just gave her a brief nod as she followed behind him at a good distance, using okay-ish stealth skills. He also used his own stealth skills, though he didn't go full-on Unseen Hunter.

Getting to the battlefield didn't take long, and Jake observed things for a while to see how the elves fought. As expected, lots of light magic was going on, with burning rays filling the air and scorching beasts in droves.

Some of this light magic came from towers constructed near the frontlines, with each of these towers having a group of five C-grades at the top, while the inside was filled with D-grades and magical scripts, making these D-grades effectively serve as batteries and amplifiers. A few D-grades wouldn't help much... but stuff a few thousand into a tower, and it could do some work. Again, seeing how a planet with such a huge population had adapted to fight was very interesting.

Jake kept looking as he made his way forward, being careful with his speed so the scout could keep up, and he didn't show off too much. Soon enough, he spotted his target in the distance, and as the general had said, it definitely played things safe. Its way of fighting also reminded Jake a bit of the Fallen King, as it sent out blasts of force here and there, though it was definitely more specialized for long-range combat rather than mid-range.

He took a bit longer to find a good vantage point, at which point he began setting up. To sell his one-trick style of combat, Jake began to put down a magic circle around him before he would shoot. What did this circle do? Nothing, Jake just made up some bullshit, but he kept the runes super fucking complicated to make sure the scout couldn't see he was faking it.

After about a minute of setting up the fake magic circle, Jake finally took out his bow. He had considered it and decided to still use a Protean Arrow, though he wouldn't make one with full power. His reason for using one was more for aesthetic reasons. It just made more sense that a big arrow would do way more damage than a small arrow.

Finally, Jake nocked the arrow and began to charge Arcane Powershot. He very carefully estimated how much power he put in before he released the string and sent the arrow flying. The Prima he targeted noticed the attack coming its way and tried to react, but Jake used Gaze to ensure it would hit.

The arrow struck the Prima right in the chest before exploding, sending it flying backward as parts of its body were blown apart. Jake had very deliberately ensured he wouldn't one-shot it, just get very close.

He followed up with three more arrows before the Prima could recover, finally taking it down for good.

You have slain [Tencufi Prima – lvl 279]

Jake nodded, satisfied with his performance. However, when he saw the scout, she looked on with wide eyes while gawking.

Seriously? Jake questioned. He had held back so much... did she have any idea how difficult it was to not one-shot something below his own level like that? It was really bloody hard to be that weak!

Either way, he hoped he hadn't overdone it. Still, to buy some more good guy points, Jake unleashed a few more attacks, killing regular monsters that looked like they were causing problems for the many elven fighters. He only stopped when a group of winged beasts began to head his way, retreating as he quickly made his way back toward the general, trying to look extremely tired from this whole ordeal.

Jake had the scout go ahead as he made himself a lot slower to get back. He needed to give the scout some time to report while also hopefully selling that he was kind of tired. When he finally arrived and saw the very pleased look on the face of the general, Jake believed he had succeeded.

"Truly impressive... you might just be the strongest mercenary to have arrived thus far," the general said. "At least you have the single-strongest attack I've seen. Very useful for hunting powerful monsters, for sure."

"I do have some more cards hidden that I've saved specifically for the Prima Guardian," Jake shared, also trying to bring the topic back to the Prima Guardian. While the planet was interesting, his main objective was still to kill the big boss, after all.

"Certainly, we are one step closer to facing the Guardian, but to release it is not my decision, but up to the discretion of the Voice of the One and the guidance he receives from the Great Bright One," the general shook his head before smiling. "Luckily for you, I got a report just before you returned... the Voice of the One has agreed to see you."

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Chapter 954: Voice of the One

Finally Jake would have a meeting with the World Leader of the humongously populated elven planet. He needed the guy to agree to engage the Prima Guardian, so this was what he had been waiting for. It was also why Jake had been holding back so far.

Jake felt pretty damn certain that had he gone full power from the get-go and flexed all over the elves, he would have never gotten a meeting with the Voice of the One unless he forced his way to one. Even so, there was a chance Jake would have to kill a lot of elves to get what he wanted... and he really didn't see any need to do that.

People tended to fear people who were *too* strong. What Jake had presented proved that he was powerful, yes, perhaps even the most powerful individual on the planet... but not so strong that the general and others felt like they couldn't still handle Jake should he choose to turn hostile.

To clarify, Jake didn't see a world where they could handle him at full power if they did end up in a conflict. This was a big reason why he wanted to avoid having to fight in the first place.

It wasn't like acting weaker than he actually was felt like a slight to his honor or anything. He would reveal himself soon enough when the time was right. All of this was just a strategy to most effectively get what he wanted without also doing a genocide.

Miranda also wouldn't like it if Jake did a genocide. Definitely wouldn't look good either from an outside perspective if Jake went to some peaceful elven planet and just started blasting. Ell'Hakan could definitely use that to spin his story about how truly evil Jake was. Last but not least... Jake just didn't want to kill a bunch of weaklings for no damn reason if he could avoid it. It just felt icky.

Either way, operation “strong but not too strong” had succeeded, and Jake was on his way to a meeting with the Voice of the One. The attendant escorted him with much delight while praising how powerful he was. She also really laid it on thick how awesome the Great Bright One was, and her intent for Jake to join them was utterly shameless. Honestly, Jake respected the gift.

Once they arrived back in the capital city, they were soon joined by a group of elves to take Jake the rest of the way. However, in addition to these, Jake also saw a few of the mercenaries around, keeping an eye on things. Together with the elven escort that was definitely in the higher echelons of power of the planet and the mercenaries... yep, these were definitely the people meant to ensure Jake wouldn't try anything.

Certainly wouldn't have allowed me within a hundred kilometers of the Voice of the One if they thought I was a risk to his life, Jake thought confidently as he politely greeted the escort and followed them. Surprisingly, they left the capital city again and headed toward a large mountain Jake had spotted in the distance before but hadn't really thought more about.

Jake flew with the same pace as his escorts, the mercenaries not even trying to hide they were also there. It didn't take long before they arrived at the mountain, where Jake saw even more guards around. These were stronger than his escort, too.

What's more, Jake couldn't remember when he had last seen so many magical barriers and formations in one place. Mind you, this wasn't because this was the most impressive Jake had seen, just that most seemed to prioritize quality over quantity, and because maintaining this many formations had to be expensive as hell.

He also saw that the mountain had been hollowed out, with a structure built within. In the center of the construction, Jake saw a room with a single person sitting inside. The man Jake was to speak with, he reckoned.

“The Voice of the One awaits inside,” one of the guards at the main gate said, as he carefully looked over Jake.

“I'm happy to have been allowed this meeting,” Jake said, continuing to play his role.

The guard just nodded and threw a glance at his partner. The two of them took out a token each as they lit up, making the door also light up, and a hallway filled with light appeared in front of Jake. It was so damn bright it looked like a laser shot out of the hallway, attempting to blind Jake.

Bloody hell, Jake cursed internally as he walked into the hallway of light. Once inside, he saw that the source of light was magic circles placed on every wall, with a one-way mirror placed in front of it so it would both send out and reflect light. It was so goddamn extreme and stupid Jake almost found it funny. Almost. If Jake had been a D-grade still,

he was pretty damn sure he would have been burned to a crisp just walking through the hallway with his non-existent light affinity.

Now, he was fine, though. Not that it wasn't annoying to walk through it, and he wondered how anyone could live there.

This hallway continued for nearly a hundred meters into the mountain, with a few paths off to the side here and there on the way, all covered with barriers of light that looked identical to the mirrors, making them incredibly hard to spot within the light-filled hallway. Behind these barriers, Jake also finally saw one of the reasons for the design of this place.

They had been pretty hard to see due to their incorporeal forms... but the mountain had quite a few light elementals within it. These elementals fed on the heavy light affinity mana to grow stronger, and Jake wouldn't be surprised if they were somehow tied to the Voice of the One or even the Great Bright One.

Having reached the end of the hallway, it was time to find out what he was dealing with. A door opened up at the end of the hallway, and Jake walked inside and found himself in a small room with a couch and a chair that, for one, wasn't filled with light. The door behind him closed as another one opened up in front of him, leading into where the Voice of the One sat.

Jake had been surprised at, and even praised, the way the Council Estate had designed their meeting room. He liked that they didn't use height to indicate they had a higher position than any guests visiting. This was clearly not a sentiment shared by the Voice of the One.

The entire room was large and circular, with a large raised platform in the middle with a circular bed. On top of this bed, an elfen man sat with his eyes closed, light mana revolving around him. He had long blonde hair that spilled out onto the bed, and he wore a bright white robe with intricate patterns on it. Entering the room, Jake quickly used Identify.

[Elf – lvl 287 – Greater Blessing of the Great Bright One]

Right as he did, the elf also opened his eyes, both shooting out beams of light for a moment. Jake immediately felt an Identify on him, and he felt pretty happy he had masked his true level before going to the planet. He was also impressed that the elf had a higher level than himself... though Jake wouldn't comment on the power level he felt from the elf.

Alright, he would. Stronger than Olliandra but way weaker than Jake. Weaker than anyone on Earth's strike team, too. Maybe around the level of Reika?

“Welcome, World Leader from across the stars,” the Voice of the One said in a voice that echoed throughout the hall.

“Hello there,” Jake said with a smile, also noting the Greater Blessing on the guy. A Greater Blessing was enough to allow someone to directly communicate with a god, albeit not very effectively. Usually, those blessed could only talk with their gods through rituals, prayers, some forms of meditation, or other unique circumstances where the god directly reached out. The higher your rank of Blessing was, the easier it was to hear the words of a god, and the easier it was to reach out.

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Jake being able to directly talk with Villy was definitely not normal in the slightest... especially not these days.

“I hear you have proven yourself not only a leader but a hunter of impressive power. Thank you for offering your assistance to us,” the elven man said, nodding his head slightly in acknowledgment. **“I was also told you wish to engage the Prima Guardian soon rather than later. However, after conferring with the Great Bright One, I must sadly inform you that this is not possible. It’s too soon, and we cannot be blinded by ambition and move too fast.”**

And this was where Jake believed his role of being “strong but not too strong” ended, and his role as a “terrifying existence who can kill your Prima Guardian and threatens the entire planet if you piss him off too much” began. For more chapters visit novel~fire~net

Jake smiled as he looked at the Voice of the One.

“Impressive theatrics... this entire setup is indeed very elaborate. Definitely convincing to the masses,” Jake spoke, his tone and demeanor changed. Something the Voice of the One clearly noticed.

“I do not know what you are-“

“You said you just talked to the Great Bright One, right?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

The elf nodded and was about to answer, but Jake cut him off before he had a chance to.

“See, that’s a little weird, isn’t it... considering I haven’t been able to reach out to the god who blessed me ever since the system event began,” Jake said, in a very much accusatory tone.

This was something Jake hadn't really commented on, and it had even taken him a moment to notice... but ever since the Prima Guardian arrived on Earth and the event officially began, he had been cut off from Villy. Perhaps it was his time in Nevermore, where he spent fifty years cut off from the god, that had made it not feel that weird anymore not to have Villy observing anymore.

Considering it was a system event, perhaps this shouldn't be overly surprising, but the event did feel different in that he could still travel around and even go to other universes. At least he believed he could, though he hadn't tried. Either way... point was that the Voice of the One was full of shit when he said he had been talking to his god.

The atmosphere in the room changed with Jake's accusation, and he got the feeling the elf was about to do something as Jake, for the first time since arriving on the planet, didn't hold back at all. He fully unleashed his aura, mixing in a bit of Pride.

"I wouldn't do anything stupid," Jake said in a cold tone. "We're just talking here, right?"

Staring down at Jake with wide eyes, the Voice of the One was visibly shaking. "You... you were sent here by Ell'Hakan, weren't you?"

... what?

Alright... alright, he could try and roll with this.

"You know why I'm here," Jake tried to act menacingly. Which, unsurprisingly, wasn't very hard when the elf was already shaking in fear. At least he was for a moment, but he seemed to gather himself rather quickly and regained some dignity as he answered.

"I... we never intended to get into any conflict with the Prima Guardian Alliance, and there is no cause for this. We may not be working with you, but that does not make us enemies. All we want is to continue our peaceful existence and remain neutral," the elf said.

Jake definitely felt like the villain in this situation, threatening the leader of a peaceful faction, but he still kept pressing.

"You paint yourself some peaceful leader, yet you rule through deceit and lies, making your entire planet believe this Great Bright One is some supreme god and creator of the system. Did you really think that would have no consequences?" Jake asked, trying to remain cold. "Also, do you truly think Ell'Hakan will allow you to just sit on the sidelines?"

The Voice of the One clenched his fists when Jake said this. For a moment, he seemed to reflect on something before he looked up at Jake with steeled eyes. "Says you, the servant of some delusional fucking lunatic who abuses his Bloodline to create fanatics to fight some other Chosen. And for what? To help his equally delusional Patron try and

kill a Primordial? It's lunacy, and yet you dare accuse me of anything. Did I lie? Yes, yes, I fucking did! How else was I supposed to get seventy-nine damn countries in one room and united under one banner? We would have destroyed ourselves before this event even started if I hadn't! They needed something to gather around, some sense of certainty. Do I think this is ideal? Of course I don't, but it's not something I can fix right now, not when the entire damn galaxy is trapped between two Chosen trying to compete on who can be the biggest menace to the multiverse."

To say he went off would be an understatement, as the Voice of the One yelled practically everything. Jake was honestly taken aback at the sheer fervor displayed by the elf, but more than that... he really hated Ell'Hakan, didn't he? Not that he sounded like a massive fan of Jake, either.

The elf also clearly wasn't done as he stood up. In all of the rooms within the mountain, Jake felt the light elementals stir as the Voice of the One prepared to call upon them. "I may not be as powerful as you, but even if I die, I sha-

"No, we're good," Jake interrupted the guy as he raised a hand.

"... what?"

"We good," Jake repeated. "Though I would recommend "orange fuck" over Ell'Hakan."

A brief pause followed.

"Who are you?" the elf just stared confused.

"Thayne," he finally introduced himself. Having revealed his power, keeping his name a secret didn't matter much anymore, and it would also be nice to see if the guy recognized him.

"That name... you're the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?" the Voice of the One asked with wide eyes.

"The one and only," Jake answered nonchalantly. "Though I guess that isn't super impressive in retrospect. Compared to the Great Bright One, the Malefic Viper is just some nobody, right?"

"I... that was never something I claimed..." the elf said, back to acting pretty damn fearful. "All I said was that the system was granted to us by the Great Bright One. Our Tutorial was organized by this god, and I did well and managed to get my Blessing there, and with it being the only divine influence anyone knew of... I will admit I took advantage to try and make the Great Bright One look far more impressive than any god can possibly be. However, I never claimed anything regarding power. I even tried to make them think of the Great Bright One as more like a concept than an actual living being."

“Sounds like there is an entire story behind this entire Great Bright One thing,” Jake commented. “I may be interested in hearing it later, but for now, I’m far more interested in your little outburst regarding Ell’Hakan earlier.”

The elf hesitated but still answered after a few seconds. “The Chosen of Yip of Yore tried to recruit us for his alliance, and at first, I considered it... but the Great Bright One warned me. In retrospect, something certainly was wrong during our meeting, and after the Great Bright One explained his Bloodline, I understood what he did. Joining hands with him isn’t actually joining hands, but collaring yourself. A collar that may become a noose at any moment should Ell’Hakan so desire.”

Jake nodded at the pretty expected explanation as he asked a follow-up question: “How does the Great Bright One know so much about his Bloodline?”

“The Great Bright One was once a light elemental that has often worked with the Holy Church, even if he isn’t a member. From my understanding, he learned about Ell’Hakan through someone he knew in the Church.”

“I see,” Jake nodded. That did make sense. “Now, not to put you on the spot... but what are your thoughts on the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?”

It was definitely a bit cheeky to ask that, but Jake couldn’t help himself.

“In truth, not very positive. All I know of you is that you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, a god not known as the kindest or most merciful, and that you are by proxy in a conflict with Ell’Hakan due to your Patron. Nothing indicates to me your presence here isn’t an existential threat,” the elf answered.

Jake nodded, considering all of this from the elf’s perspective. It definitely had to suck being stuck in the middle like this while you just wanted to remain neutral.

“Fair enough. But I was truthful when I said I doubt Ell’Hakan will allow you to remain on the sidelines. Perhaps he would for a while, but his ambitions and Path require him to expand his influence and control,” Jake said.

“I’m well aware,” the elf sighed. “It truly is a choice between two evils, huh? Either we subjugate ourselves to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper or a maniac who uses his Bloodline to control your emotions.”

“No?” Jake asked, confused.

“What?” the elf said, equally confused.

“I don’t care if you remain neutral,” Jake shrugged. “Might it be necessary to recognize that you are living within the territory of the Order at some point? Sure, but I’m not sure I would call that subjugating.”

"If... if you're not here to suppress us, why did you sneak in to have a meeting with me like this in the first place?" the elven World Leader questioned.

"Oh, I've been very upfront about that from the beginning. I need you to release the Prima Guardian from the Prima Vessel so I can kill it. Afterward, I promise to return to my own planet and not bother you further. Not saying there can't be political talk after that, but it would be with my right hand," Jake said.

"... are you really just here to kill the Prima Guardian?" the elf asked in disbelief.

"Yep, and now that we've made that clear, you have no reason to refuse, right?" Jake asked with a cheeky smile as he looked forward to taking down a third Guardian.

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Chapter 955: Equal Contributors

All's well that ends well. At least, Jake thought so after he had expertly politicked his way into convincing the other World Leader to release the Prima Guardian. What's more, it turns out the elven World Leader was way more decent than Jake had initially expected.

It hadn't taken much convincing to make the guy agree to activate the Prima Guardian, not after he knew Jake's identity. In the words of the elf, if Jake couldn't beat the Prima Guardian as the top-ranking person on the Nevermore Leaderboard, then they wouldn't have stood a chance either way and would have faced total annihilation.

There was one minor issue, though.

"The Prima Vessel struck down on the other side of the planet from the capital, and while we have populated much of this world and have some forward bases, there is still a vast area of wilderness between the nearest teleportation circle and the Vessel," the elven World Leader explained.

"How long do you reckon it will take to reach it?" Jake questioned.

"With my speed, around half a day. We could also try and find a space mage to make things faster, but I doubt I would want to. I know that the Primas made use of those with the space affinity among them to reach out defensive positions faster, but I'm not sure if bringing along a third person would be wise," the elf said, shaking his head.

"Why not?" Jake asked. If they could get there faster, that would just be great.

"It would risk exposing things," the elf said as he seemed to think for a while. "This may seem presumptuous, but would it be fine if the story after this becomes that the two of us faced the Prima Guardian together?"

"Will we face it together?" Jake questioned. "Not gonna lie, I feel like you would be more of a liability than any kind of help. In fact, I'm positively certain you would cause more harm than good."

No way Lone Hunter would work if he did actually fight with the guy, even if he was a lot weaker. Also, while Jake said the elf felt about as strong as Reika, he questioned how good the guy would actually be at fighting if he had just been the spiritual leader for his planet this entire time. He definitely specialized in a Path revolving around being the Voice of the One rather than a fighter.

"That's a bit insulting but probably also true," the elf sighed. "My point is that should you just kill the Prima Guardian alone, there will be many questions, while if I say we killed it together, there will be far fewer who raise any issues. I want to keep it entirely ambiguous who contributed the most, allowing everyone here to believe I was the one who did the most, while anyone else who hears about it will naturally know I was just a tag-along required to release the boss."

"We can talk about that on the way," Jake said, not outright rejecting the idea as he did want to ask some more questions about this entire planet, and seeing as they had quite a few hours of traveling through the wilderness together, he reckoned there would be plenty of time for that.

"Very well," the elven World Leader nodded. "By the way, I noticed I never introduced myself. Name's Kindroth, Son of Kindrothar... yes, my father didn't have a lot of imagination when it came to names. Ah, but please avoid using my name when around others. No one has actually called me by it ever since I got the title of Voice of the One."

"I guess you already know, but my full name's Jake Thayne, no idea where the Thayne comes from," Jake also reintroduced himself. "Now, how do you want to approach going out there, oh Voice of the One?"

Kindroth smiled a bit at Jake's mocking tone as he got down and stood beside Jake. "Again, I must act presumptuously and make it look like we're walking out there as equals. If not, it will just cause undue trouble I don't think either of us want."

"I genuinely don't care," Jake shrugged, the elf looking relieved at the answer. "I do care a little how you will introduce me, though. Because there's no way I'm going to let you tell everyone I'm some agent sent by the Great Bright One. Oh, and also, I already told that council of yours I don't follow a god, so that may cause some problems."

"Is that because you don't want others to know you are the Chosen?" Kindroth questioned, surprised.

"At the time, I wanted to avoid it," Jake shrugged. "I get the feeling they wouldn't have allowed me to see you had I introduced myself as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

"True, they would have likely tried to evacuate a very willing me to some safehouse while trying to make you leave the planet... something I don't imagine would have ended well for them, seeing as you need me to free the Prima Guardian and you don't strike me as the sort who would have just left," Kindroth nodded. "But if you are fine with people knowing now, let me formally introduce you. As for what you said to the council... well, you don't exactly follow the Malefic Viper, now do you? You instead embody his will and act as his mortal representative. Merely saying you follow the Malefic One doesn't do such a vital role justice, so you never lied in the slightest."

Jake looked at the elf a bit and saw him flash a familiar smile he had seen Miranda with several times. The guy really was good at lying and twisting the truth, which shouldn't be that surprising considering what he had accomplished on the planet.

With a plan of sorts, the two of them walked back through the hallway of light, and as they passed the different rooms with light elementals inside, Kindroth held out his hands as each elemental turned into a beam of light that shot toward him and formed a small rune upon landing on his body. The elf obviously noticed Jake's interested gaze as he explained:

"I am able to absorb and use light elementals, and quite honestly, I'm pretty useless without them," he said with a wry smile. "It does fit me pretty well thematically, though. Summoning a light elemental as the voice of someone called the Great Bright One is very convincing."

Jake didn't comment but just nodded as they soon reached the exit of the mountain. Outside, the entire escort group, mercenaries, and guards waited. When the gate swung open, and they all saw the Voice of the One, they all instantly fell to their knees, with even the mercenaries acting overly respectful.

"We greet the Voice of the One," the two guards said in unison.

"At ease," Kindroth said as he raised a hand and he turned to look at Jake. "This man and I are on our way to release the Prima Guardian now and slay it."

His words were incredibly direct, earning him many confused gazes as one of the mercenaries stepped forward. "Excuse me, but weren't you recruiting us to help face the Guardian?"

Kindroth looked at the mercenary and nodded. "That is true. However, things have changed. I would welcome you all to continue helping against the Primas, but the Prima Guardian shall be handled by the two of us."

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"I don't mean to question you, but I have heard these Prima Guardians are not to be underestimated..." the mercenary said, and Jake detected some genuine worry from the guy. Jake wasn't sure if it was because he was a decent guy who wanted to warn another person or that he realized shit would hit the fan if the Voice of the One went and got himself killed, but it didn't matter either way.

"Your worry is entirely needless. This is the will of the Great Bright One, and besides, I do not go alone," the Voice of the One said, looking back to Jake. "Introductions may be late, but allow me to anyway: This man is the Chosen of the Malefic One, the pinnacle of our Era. With him at my side, what do I have to fear?"

Jake saw Kindroth give him a subtle wink, and Jake instantly understood. His aura flared as the mercenary stumbled back in fright along with the escort group and guards. The guards even seemed to take a defensive stance but didn't go further than that as the Voice of the One spoke.

"I believe there shall be no further objections? Good. Now we shall be off; there is no reason to delay needlessly," the elf said, turning to leave.

Jake just gave them all a nod as he followed, deciding to not say or do anything that could disturb whatever ploy the elf was cooking up.

None of them dared say anything, though they definitely looked like they wanted to, as Jake and the Voice of the One headed toward the capital city, flying at a steady pace. Once there, Kindroth had them stop by the Council Estate to explain their plans, and all of the council members were shocked when they learned who Jake really was. Any kind of worry that Jake could be a danger was also shut down by the Voice of the One, allowing the two of them to leave quickly and really showing how much damn influence the elf had. Even if he didn't officially lead the planet, it was clear his word was law, and if he told them to jump, the only question they would ask was how high.

A few teleports later, they finally reached a forward base wherefrom they would head into the wilderness. Every person they met on the way there bowed in reverence toward Kindroth, with the elf responding with kind words every time without missing a beat.

However, once they were out of the cities and made their way a bit into the wilderness, the elf let out a huge sigh. "How do you keep up with it?"

"What?" Jake asked.

"Being more of a figurehead than a person," Kindroth said. "It's exhausting. The constant expectations of perfection and flawless modicum in any situation, the fact anyone believes anything you say is pure fact and won't even argue back or advise you on anything even when what you say is dumb as fuck... for a while, I thought it was great, but now all it does is tire me out. You know, that's one of the reasons I was keen on having a council and rarely get involved with anything they do. I'm sure they can govern way better than I can, and I can just act like some benevolent semi-divine existence without them questioning anything."

"If it's any consolation, going by how things are here, they definitely can rule the planet better than you as a council," Jake shrugged. "As for your question... I kind of don't feel like that? It's probably because you are a public figure, while I remain very much private. Those I do choose to interact with on a regular basis I view more as equals, with them also treating me as a person."

"Sounds nice," Kindroth said with a dry smile. "You're the first person I've had a normal conversation with where I don't have to pretend for... well, ever since Nevermore. I went there with a group organized with input from my Patron, so I could act pretty normal there. Now that I'm back here, though..."

As the two of them continued their journey, they continued having small talk. Jake was also surprised at how casually the elf had quickly begun to treat Jake, as he was also used to people acting weird once they knew he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Perhaps it was because he had been socially starved, or just that he was so used to never being viewed as beneath anyone, so he wasn't really thinking about it, but the elf seemed more than happy to treat Jake as an equal.

Another positive thing about the Elven World Leader was his speed, which genuinely impressed Jake. As a light magic user, Jake had expected him to be pretty fast, but he surpassed expectations and could keep up with Jake pretty damn well. The fact Jake still couldn't summon his wings did slow him down a little, but just using One Step and flying normally, Jake was still pretty damn speedy.

Jake and Kindroth did encounter a few Primas on the way, but Jake easily handled them one after another. They were all pretty damn weak, and based on Jake's estimates, he didn't even think the Prima Guardian would be stronger on this planet than on Olliandra's. It would probably be dependent on how many Primas had died. **NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON [novel*fire*net](http://novelfire.net)**

There was one time when they were attacked by four Primas at once that Jake let Kindroth handle one of them on his own, and as expected... he kinda sucked in combat. His offensive power basically came down to summoning light elementals and basic magic attacks, and that was about it.

On the defensive side, he was pretty fucking good, though. The Primas couldn't even try to catch him, and Jake understood why the guy hadn't seemed worried about getting

killed by the Prima Guardian before Jake could help. He was a man fully specialized in conning the populace and being really good at running away.

As Kindroth had said, it ended up taking them about half a day to reach the Prima Vessel. Once there, the two of them briefly discussed their approach before Jake headed up into the sky as the elf entered the Vessel.

The plan was simple: Jake would go stealth and prepare his strongest attack far up in the sky, while Kindroth would go trigger the Prima Guardian and then quickly run out of the Vessel, never once attacking or directly engaging the Guardian with the hope this wouldn't interfere with Lone Hunter.

It was indeed a simple plan, thought up by a simple hunter who soon stopped once he was above a few layers of clouds as he got ready. He proceeded to make his Protean Arrow, specializing it to kill flesh and blood lifeforms as practically every Prima they had seen was one, and he even put on his best Heartrot Poison to really ensure it would be a real killer.

Nocking the Protean Arrow, Jake held nothing back as he began charging his attack with Arcane Awakening fully activated. The arcane energies revolved around him while Arcane Powershot built up power, and just then, a beam of light flew out of the Prima Vessel.

A moment later, another figure followed. The Prima Guardian that appeared reminded Jake a bit of a lamia, actually, with a squid-like bottom and a kind of more humanoid top section, though it was still a bit away from actually looking like an elf or human. Not that its appearance was that important, considering Jake nor anyone else wouldn't be looking at it for long.

Kindroth, as the target of the Prima Guardian, kept dodging away as it chased him, having turned himself into a living beam of light. Jake took his time to fully charge the attack, as the elf really didn't look like he was in any danger. On a side note here... Lone Hunter was still active, though Jake really didn't have much time to consider if it really should be.

A dozen or so seconds passed with the Prima Guardian trying to chase down Kindroth, until Jake felt his body reach its limits. With a final deep breath, Jake released the string as the attack descended, parting the clouds in its wake as it left a trail of destructive energies.

To make sure he would hit, he naturally also made sure to use a Primal Gaze on the Guardian as it froze up, stopping its chase. Kindroth barely had time to materialize to see Jake's arrow strike true.

Perhaps it was because the Prima Guardian didn't have any time to adapt and improve, or maybe it was its slightly lower level... but this time around, Jake didn't end up

needing any follow-up arrows. The attack hit the Prima Guardian right on top of its head, blowing it apart entirely before continuing through its body, destroying it from within as more than eighty percent of its body mass was destroyed with that one arrow – its surviving flesh infected with Heartrot Poison.

It was pretty satisfying seeing Kindroth gawk in awe as Jake got his notification.

You have slain [Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 315]– Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Satisfied, Jake descended toward the elven World Leader. As he did... Jake actually felt a bit nervous that the elf would start to act weird, as he had enjoyed their more casual interactions over the last day or so. However, that proved to not be a problem. Right when Jake got close, the elf exclaimed loudly.

"You are fucking overpowered, you know that right? Damn, now it makes sense why the final message I got from my Patron was to not piss you off; you're more dangerous than this entire bloody Prima Invasion."

Jake couldn't help but smile as he shot back. "And yet we were somehow equal contributors to the outcome of this fight."

"I know, right? How nice of me to give you credit despite doing most of the work," the elf smirked, staring at the huge crater left behind by the remnant energy of Jake's arrow after it had destroyed the supposedly planet-threatening Prima Guardian.

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Chapter 956: A Bright Near Future

Ell'Hakan received the report as he was on the move, and after scanning it briefly, he nodded, satisfied with the results so far. A second Prima Guardian had been slain without his personal involvement, helping speed things up and further cementing trust in the Prima Guardian Alliance. They now had two confirmed teams capable of handling Prima Guardians, though the report did state they lost two fighters, so they would need replacements before engaging the next one.

Naturally, that didn't mean Ell'Hakan was lazing about. He was currently on his way to yet another Prima Vessel, the local World Leader and a party of fighters already waiting at it and ready for his arrival. The Prima Guardian he'd faced on his own planet had been far more difficult than any of these other ones and was something he could easily

handle on his lonesome. Such personal displays of strength were always useful to the alliance, too, and he wasn't going to complain about the improved system reward at the end of the event either.

Despite things going well so far, he was far from without worries... and the Malefic Viper's Chosen wasn't even the only cause of it.

This "I" character who'd seemingly performed as well as himself and the Viper's Chosen was still a complete mystery, and with him cut off from Yip of Yore, he couldn't get any divine information on who it may be either. What's more... he had his suspicions that this person or creature was no longer on its homeworld anymore. He did not need this chaotic element.

While considering this, he got another message sent to him.

He scanned the new message briefly. The Prima Guardian Alliance had managed to sneak in a group of mercenaries to the planet of this Great Bright One – a world Ell'Hakan was very much interested in due to its extremely high population and homogeneity – and that message briefly outlined that a certain Chosen had made a visit.

The mercenaries sent only knew that the Chosen had gone to meet with the elf who called himself the "Voice of the One" and nothing more, but that in itself was already... concerning.

Ell'Hakan wasn't just interested in the planet due to its properties, but due to this Voice of the One and his abilities. Few World Leaders had impressed him, and he'd met quite a few of them during the Prima Alliance talk, and out of everyone, the elf was the one Ell'Hakan regarded the highest. It was someone Ell'Hakan had very much wanted in his inner circle, and before this message arrived, he'd still believed it would be possible.

There was no way the mercenaries they'd gathered could take down the Prima Guardian, and Ell'Hakan believed that after their failure, the Voice of the One would be a lot more receptive to further negotiations. Ell'Hakan could respect that the elf didn't like him and was wary, but he still believed that should he face the choice between facing annihilation at the hands of the Prima Guardian and joining hands with the Prima Guardian Alliance, the Voice of the One would make the right choice and come to Ell'Hakan for help.

However... now that didn't seem like it would happen. Not to say this was necessarily a bad outcome. Ell'Hakan saw it very likely that this would all result in the Chosen of the Malefic Viper slaying the Voice of the One due to his personal disagreement with how the planet was ruled or because the World Leader refused to release the Prima Guardian.

If that happened, the Chosen would be forced to engage in quite the slaughter, not just slowing him down during this system event but even giving Ell'Hakan plenty of

ammunition to work with and back up the story that the Chosen was a danger to the Prima Guardian Alliance and in no way someone they could even attempt to talk to.

As for the Voice of the One and the Chosen of the Malefic Viper striking some kind of deal or working together, Ell'Hakan considered the chances of that happening pretty low. Now, should it happen, that would undoubtedly end up being a little annoying, but it shouldn't really impact things that much, right?

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"Congratulations, you are now one of the premiere owners of real estate in this entire universe," Jake said with a smile as Kindroth claimed ownership of the Planetary Pylon, thus fully taking the planet as his own.

They were naturally within the core chamber of the planet, having teleported there using the Prima Vessel after the Guardian had died.

"One of the first things I did was abolish private land ownership and claimed that everything the light touched belonged to the Great Bright One, as one of the primary causes of discord before the system was territorial disputes," the elfen World Leader answered in a deadpan voice.

"In other words, you fully monopolized the real estate market, truly a genius business move," Jake joked with the guy. "I do wonder how you plan on getting out of all the bullshit you filled the populace with, though. This delusional level of belief in the Great Bright One can't continue forever."

"I'm well aware," Kindroth sighed. "And I can't see an immediate solution either. I do have a plan in mind, though. Scrubbing the planet of the influence of the Great Bright One isn't possible, nor something I want, as I am still a follower of my Patron, and my job is to gather faith for him, but I will begin to address the more extreme beliefs. It will be a subtle process that will take many years, at least decades if not centuries, but I hope I can bring it to a healthy level eventually. May have to push a few people off the levitator in the process, and some political figures may die as I blame them for having twisted my words and the Words of the Great Bright One, but that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

Jake looked at the elf for a moment before just shaking his head. When joking around and being casual, he sometimes forgot this was a man who had somehow managed to unite over a hundred billion elves by getting all of the different country leaders in the same room together and somehow walked out with every single one loyal to him. Jake sucked at politics, something that certainly couldn't be said about Kindroth.

"Like it or not, the planet belongs to you now. At least according to the system it does, and is there really a higher authority?" Jake commented.

"Let's just be honest with ourselves... is it really mine?" the elf raised an eyebrow. "There is no way Ell'Hakan would ever allow our continued existence, even if I do try and improve things, and despite your words or intentions, should you win out, we will be considered under the influence of the Order merely by existing within the same galaxy as the home planet of the Malefic Viper's Chosen."

"What others think and the actual truth is far from always the same," Jake shook his head. "I truly, genuinely, have no interest in ruling the galaxy. Shit, I don't have any interest in ruling my own damn planet. You are right that it will probably still end up being considered my territory, but there's really nothing I can do about that. All I can say is that I have no plans of controlling what others do, as long as they don't do anything too fucked up."

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"Oh, don't get me wrong, I wasn't complaining," Kindroth grinned. "You know, the Great Bright One did brief me on his intentions when I was first blessed, and back then, before he or barely anyone knew about you and Ell'Hakan, the plan was to co-exist with the Holy Church, as assumptions were they would end up ruling the galaxy in the end. Based on what I heard about the Church, I'm not sure being under the thumb of the Order of the Malefic Viper is that much worse."

"How exactly would your way of leading this planet have worked out with the Holy Church?" Jake questioned.

"By now, I hope it's pretty clear I was spitballing most of what I did to unite the planet, with little forethought or long-term planning in the mix during those early days," Kindroth shook his head and sighed. "So you ask how it would work? It fucking wouldn't, but just as I'm willing to sacrifice a few politicians, so the Bright One would also have been willing to sacrifice me by branding me a false prophet. If I got lucky, exile would have been a good outcome from that... but even if I died, it wouldn't really have been that bad. I did what I thought I had to do to save my planet, it worked out, and if my death could secure a better future for everyone, that wouldn't be the worst way to go. We all have to die one day; may as well make it a good death."

"Surprisingly altruistic," Jake said in genuine surprise. Especially because he felt like those weren't empty words, and when he remembered that Kindroth had been willing to fight Jake even after feeling his aura... yeah, Jake believed him. He didn't agree with the "everyone dies one day" part, but it wasn't something worth really discussing.

"You do strike me as the kind of person that if you had the choice between burning down your own planet or dying, you'd start throwing fireballs... or shooting burning arrows in your case, I guess," the elf smiled. "Anyway, let's get out of here and back to talk to those mercenaries."

Jake followed the elf back to the Prima Vessel to teleport back topside, looking confused at the elf. "Why would we need to talk to them?"

"Huh, I guess no one told you... one of the reasons why we gathered a lot of mercenaries and why the mercenaries even came here was to see if a team that couldn't help just us but several planets out there could be assembled. Think of it as a worse version of the Prima Guardian Alliance that Ell'Hakan has formed, filled with a lot more naivety and delusion," Kindroth explained as he shook his head. "Having seen the Prima Guardian... pretty sure if we all those mercenaries had engaged it, the lot of them would have died. Which is great for you because that means the planets all these people come from definitely need help."

"You're saying there's a bunch of people openly looking for help just sitting around waiting for us to return? That's... convenient," Jake said, surprised.

"Almost suspiciously so," the elf smiled. "But, in truth, you just happened to get incredibly lucky that a plan thought up by the council happened to be highly ill-advised. Oh, and I'm more than happy to be your wingman in this scenario, giving you a glowing recommendation that you are indeed the top Prima Guardian hunter in the galaxy, nay, the universe."

The two of them kept talking as they teleported back to the surface and headed out to return to the nearest teleportation circle.

"As I assume you're not coming along to all these other planets, won't it ruin your story of us being equal contributors if I head off and kill a bunch of Prima Guardians alone, proving you are full of shit?" Jake questioned.

"It'll be fine, and let's not act like any efforts of mine could keep your level of power hidden. Everyone, even those on this planet, will learn of you and just how capable you truly are whether I want them to or not," Kindroth said. "When it comes to how much they will learn and how everything is framed... I believe you said her name was Miranda? The de-facto leader of your planet? Yeah, I think I'll go have a discussion with her. Going by how she's managed to put up with you as the official World Leader, and your planet hasn't been the victim of a planetary sacrificial ritual yet, she must be quite capable."

"You're awfully casual when it comes to insulting the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his court witch," Jake commented, trying to sound serious.

"First of all, I was praising her, and secondly, nothing I said was untrue," Kindroth chuckled. "Now, let's pick up the pace and get back quickly. See if you can keep up."

The cheeky bastard picked up speed, flying even faster than before as he turned his body into light form. On the way to the Prima Vessel, they had to deal with Primas a few times, so saving their resources at least a little was advised, but that wasn't an issue on

the way back. With the regular Primas also weakened due to the death of the Guardian, Kindroth wasn't worried about the forces of the planet either. While he did recognize that they didn't have many outstanding fighters, they did have a stupidly big army. Fresh chapters posted on *novel*•

Jake responded to the elf's speed in kind as he also began pushing his One Step further, the two of them shooting into the horizon. This planet, despite its far higher population, was still quite a bit smaller than Earth in size. In fact, Jake hadn't heard of anyone with larger planets than Earth in the galaxy yet, with William also reporting that Ell'Hakan's planet was smaller. It was honestly kind of nice because if some of them were larger, Jake could definitely need to drag Sandy along so he wouldn't have to potentially end up running for weeks to reach the Prima Vessels, dragging along some weak World Leader.

There wasn't much banter for the rest of the way back, as the two of them soon reached the teleportation circle where they were received by an entire goddamn army who had been awaiting the return of the Voice of the One and his "helper," the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Once more, Kindroth put on his persona as he masterfully – and swiftly – handled the crowd and allowed Jake and him to pass and return to the capital. Once back, they made a brief visit to the Council Estate to report their success and were also told that the general had already sent a message that the Primas had all gotten significantly weaker.

A bit more stupid politicking later, Jake and the Voice of the One managed to gather the mercenaries representing different planets. Very few people traveled alone like Jake had, but instead went around in parties or even small companies. Some were sent there alone, acting more like envoys or ambassadors rather than mercenaries, which was also why these mercenaries were stationed in the Council Estate in the first place – something Jake hadn't really questioned but really should have in retrospect.

Jake and Kindroth only needed one person from each other planet, who hopefully held some level of influence back home. These people were all considered within the stronger echelon of their planets, and none of them had engaged the Prima Guardians on their worlds yet. Some of them were still struggling, though, not even able to handle the regular Primas. These mercenaries had pretty much given up on their homeworlds, believing it was doomed. They were helpless and had tried to run to this planet as an escape, perhaps only holding a faint hope deep in their heart that someone would help them.

That was awesome, right?

Because these people took no convincing or wing-manning from the Voice of the One at all. In fact, the moment they heard that all Jake cared about was hunting down Prima Guardians and how killing the Guardian would weaken all the regular Primas and even

allow the native monster population to turn and fight the Primas, they were fully on board.

Jake had believed finding a bunch of planets to hunt Prima Guardians on would be difficult. However, as Kindroth said, he'd ended up seriously lucking out by going to this particular elven planet. Jake, a whole bunch of mercenaries, as well as the Voice of the One – who announced he'd been given a quest to confer with the "Witch of Verdant Origins" – all headed toward the large metal dome allowing people to teleport to and from the planet.

The near future was really looking bright for Jake, and when all was said and done, he had a list of at least a dozen planets who were more than happy to have a hunter endorsed by the Voice of the One come to kill their Prima Guardian for them. Even those who knew he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper were convinced by Kindroth, the elf taking advantage of the fact that most mortals really had fuck-all idea about how gods worked and just knew that Jake was some big-shot from the Order of some evil snake god... but if someone named the Voice of the One, representing a god of light said it was fine, it had to be fine, right? He was also a big-shot, after all.

One thing was for sure... due to Kindroth, Jake had a lot of Prima Guardian to kill, and Miranda had quite an interesting meeting ahead of her.

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Chapter 957: Methodologies of War

"Fire," Caleb said as a string of black beams shot out, landing on the creature as it roared in anger and pain. It turned toward the position of the snipers and began charging their way as Caleb spoke again. "Activate illusory array four."

A second later, the entire area seemed to warp slightly. The charging Prima Guardian didn't even look like it noticed as it kept charging... but rather than head toward the snipers, it began to slightly curve to one side, with it soon running an entirely wrong way.

The array wouldn't last long before the Guardian noticed, but it was good enough for now. Caleb directed the thirteenth and eighteenth squads of assassins to move in while the Guardian was distracted as ten people erupted from the shadows and attacked the boss, each unleashing powerful skills right away. Caleb also took the chance to glance at the boss yet another time, noting its growing injuries while also throwing in another Identify for the heck of it... and because he wanted to make sure this one couldn't

somehow evolve mid-combat, primarily because he remembered the one on Earth having a different name.

[Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 323]

Turning to look at the people that attacked it, the Guardian was faced with only shadows as the ten assassins retreated once more. Another barrage of sniper fire hit a moment later, this time from across the valley from the exact opposite side as the first attack.

Having noticed something was wrong, the Guardian began to release pulses of mana, both analyzing and disrupting the formations and arrays they had placed down in a massive area around the Prima Vessel. The response was quick, as the mages of the Court responded by disabling some of the magic circles temporarily, fooling the Prima into thinking it had destroyed them.

This was the first planet he had gone to after leaving Earth to help the Court of Shadows, and so far, he would say things were going well. The Prima Guardian was also surprisingly weak compared to the one he had fought before, yet pretty damn strong if the planet was meant to have faced it by itself.

Then again, they weren't meant to face it yet, but after potentially over two and a half years, during which they would wipe out most Primas, leading to a weaker Prima Guardian, too. If this wasn't the case, Caleb would have expected the majority of planets with enlightened across the universe to be wiped out, but as things were and the current rules... the Court of Shadows intelligence network put the expected percentage of planets who would end up "destroyed" at twenty-two percent.

It was yet undecided if the Milky Way would drag this stat up or down... but Caleb would do his utmost to ensure it would go the right way.

He continued to direct the flow of combat as more than four thousand members of the Court of Shadows participated in this Prima Guardian hunt. Many of them were supportive members, helping with the formations and arrays to control the Guardian, but there were still over five hundred melee assassins on the battlefield and about an equal number of ranged attackers.

Individually, none of them could do much to the Guardian. However, the Court of Shadows did have some unique abilities that allowed them to still participate. Out of perhaps every faction in the entire multiverse, the Court was the best at having their members be able to still deal damage to things they really shouldn't be able to even touch.

A random newly evolved D-grade attacking someone like Jake, more likely than not, wouldn't do any damage at all. That is to say, you could get a million of the same guy and have them all attack, and unless they used some means to combine their attacks through rituals or formations, none of them would cause any harm. Jake's durability would simply be too high for them. It was a threshold they couldn't pass.

The Court of Shadows had ways to circumvent this threshold. Shadows were slippery and ethereal and could penetrate even the natural defenses granted by the system, even if the damage would be incredibly minor. Even a skilled D-grade assassin could deal damage to a peak C-grade with a single sniper bullet or a stab of their dagger.

Now, the damage would be absolutely negligible. As in, perhaps not even doing one health point's worth of damage... but just the mere fact it did any kind of damage at all was massive.

Needless to say, a bunch of mid-tier C-grades attacking a late-tier C-grade could do far more than a single health point of damage with every blow, but individually, they really were too weak to stand a chance. Yet, in this battle, they were enabled and able to fully participate. All of this was part of the core strategy the Court of Shadows often deployed to take down dangerous foes:

Isolate, harass, kite, confuse, and wear down. If a target couldn't be killed quickly, kill them slowly in a dragged-out assassination where you controlled all factors. Use the shadows to limit their Perception and hide away, never giving them time to recover, and eventually, even someone far more powerful than the assassins would eventually fall.

Of course, if it was possible to go in with overwhelming power to kill the target instantly, that was preferable. In most cases, that is... this not being one of them, as the Prima Guardian wasn't a real target but a mere practice dummy. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT *novel✕fire✕net*

Caleb could attack himself, and considering how much weaker this Prima Guardian was than the one on Earth, he reckoned he would have a good chance in a one-on-one. It could get a bit dicey due to its high durability and Caleb's fighting style relying on high burst damage, but he believed he could handle it alone.

That wasn't the point of this, though. This Prima Guardian system event was viewed as just another training exercise in the eyes of the higher-ups of the Court of Shadows, and Caleb going around killing by himself wouldn't really help the natives learn anything, right?

As a Judge, Caleb wasn't just meant to be a fighter but one of the leaders of the Court of Shadows here in the ninety-third universe. Helping the natives get stronger themselves would reflect well on him and earn him more favor than if he just went around killing everything... though if things got too dangerous, he would step in personally.

The battle continued on, the Prima Guardian getting more and more whittled down. It did adapt a little to their attacks, but they attempted to counter this with different elemental attacks carried out primarily through formations or ritual spells cast by some of the mages. Still, the affinities used were very similar, which did result in the fight dragging out.

After the battle had been ongoing for over ten hours with the Prima Guardian just slowly running out of steam, the entire reason why they needed these kinds of training exercises was shown. While there was a certain level of leeway in their strategy and many fail-safes, it was still possible for a group to fuck up enough so that everything fell apart.

And that's exactly what happened.

A squad of mages responsible for a formation messed up, with the backup casters not ready in time to react. The assassins that had just emerged to follow up the attack of a group of snipers found themselves fully exposed as the Prima Guardian turned toward them, light magic channeling as the shadows meant to protect them were dispersed.

Caleb considered giving them a moment to react on their own or maybe even make this a lesson, even if it would cost lives.. but as always, he was perhaps a bit too soft, as he quickly dispelled these thoughts and moved.

Besides... sometimes it was good to show off his power a bit, lest they forget the Judge wasn't just considered an administrative role.

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All his boosting skills were fully activated as Caleb shot across the battlefield, emerging behind the Prima Guardian before it even had time to kill the first assassin. He didn't mask his approach to make sure it wouldn't kill any of them, as it quickly spun around to face him, only to find itself faced with a torrent of black lightning.

Caleb passed through the boss in his transformed state before turning himself corporeal again, slamming his staff down as the ground below the Prima Guardian erupted with lightning, dark thunderclouds gathering above. Attacking again, Caleb landed several blows with his staff before the Guardian could properly adapt to his speed, the ground below the Prima Guardian exploding once more a moment later, sending a bolt of lightning flying toward the skies above.

Riding the lightning, Caleb merged with the thunderclouds for a moment as he channeled his energies and spoke, his words echoing through the clouds.

“Thunderfall of Tenlucis.”

He descended in an instant, passing through the Prima Guardian as a pillar of black lightning consumed it. In its damaged state, it simply wasn't able to adapt to the oppressive powers of the black lightning as its body was burned from within, and its soul crumbled before the overwhelming pressure of the dark heavens.

You have slain [Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 323] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Caleb materialized himself in front of the burnt corpse of the Prima Guardian as he infused his voice with mana, addressing everyone.

”Good work from most of you, but a sloppy finale. I expect a full report from all responsible squad leaders within two hours, outlining what went wrong and how to ensure it won’t happen again. We move to the next planet in ten hours, and I expect better the second time around. Dismissed.”

Across the multiverse, there were many methodologies of war with some more alike than others.

The Holy Church and the Risen had quite a lot of things in common despite their antagonistic relationship, one of which was their hatred of being compared and people pointing out they had a lot of things in common.

Another big thing they had in common was their approach to combat. More accurately, how they viewed those participating in a fight. Many forces in the multiverse focused on elite groups, minimizing losses and only bringing those who could actually put up a proper fight to battle.

Neither the Risen nor the Holy Church had this approach, though it materialized differently. The Holy Church would gladly throw entire armies at singular, powerful people, sacrificing them all through rituals to empower their elites and bring victory. This had even been shown several times on Earth, both during the Treasure Hunt and the battle when the Risen were pushed off the planet during Ell’Hakan’s invasion.

These people who gave their lives did so gladly and willingly, as without their active participation, the methods of the Holy Church simply wouldn’t work. It was their faith that gave the Holy Church power, even in such rituals. Across the Milky Way Galaxy, rituals were carried out one after another to face not only Prima Guardians but regular Primas, billions dying as martyrs of the Holy Church.

The reason why they so gladly gave their lives was because, to many, what came after would be better. The Holyland would be an improved existence to their normal mortal lives, with many even viewing it as a privilege to be allowed to die in a ritual. Of course, to be allowed to be sacrificed, you needed to no longer be deemed a talent that could grow further to a higher grade, and the ones to go first tended to be those older and those who’d exhausted their talent.

One might view the way the Holy Church operated as insane or even evil when evaluated with Earth’s morals... but the numbers simply didn’t lie. A system event like this Prima Guardian one was far from the first of its kind that had happened during the integration of a new universe, and in all those prior, the Holy Church held the record

every single time for their planets doing the best, even surpassing Valhal, a purely combat-specialized faction.

It wasn't hard to understand why the Holy Church did so well, either. They were the best faction in the multiverse at making the "useless" useful in combat. Rather than large populations merely being statistics for an event boss to wipe out, they could be converted to tangible power that could help bring down the threat. Did this mean that sometimes, the majority of a planet's population got sacrificed? Yes... but ninety percent dying was better than a hundred.

The Holy Church truly embodied the concept of the "greater good" and could only truly exist due to the Holyland of the Holy Mother allowing those who died to enter it. With life after death, sacrificing yourself was seen as one of the most honorable ways to die, with your death only taking you to "paradise."

In this way, the Holy Church was one of the premier factions that actively used the deaths of the many to overcome their foes... the other one naturally being the Risen, though their method of taking advantage of the dead was quite different. After someone died, they couldn't become a Risen unless that death happened as part of a transformation ritual, but that didn't mean that the dead couldn't become undead.

Even the Risen could be raised once more when they fell, though it wouldn't be as what they were before. They wouldn't be the same people either, though there were some methods to preserve those who died by effectively saving their souls before they fully dispersed. The result wouldn't be like a full resurrection, and the souls would be permanently damaged, making a second resurrection absolutely impossible and often harming them in other ways, making this simply not worth it.

Either way, using other Risen was barely part of the methodology of the Risen. Why would it be, when in war, there was so much death to take advantage of? So many corpses to raise as mindless undead.

In this war against the Prima Guardians, the planets ruled by the Risen had the possibility of taking advantage of the many dead Primas and monsters during the event, raising them to be used as fodder against their former comrades. Any death on the enemy side would strengthen the Risen, truly making them a force to be reckoned with.

Of course, just throwing a bunch of raised monsters at a Prima Guardian wouldn't accomplish anything, as the raised ones were far weaker than when they were alive, and their power depended heavily on the one raising them as undead.

This is where the rituals came in.

Just like how the Holy Church could have thousands, millions, or even billions sacrifice themselves to create powerful effects, so could the Risen take a huge number of raised undead and combine their power. Sometimes, this took the form of rituals unleashing

powerful attacks with their combined energies, but the most effective version was through the creation of flesh golems or ghostly amalgamations.

The forced fusion of countless undead into singular beings. Monstrosities containing countless souls, barely stitched together by talented necromancers. These types of undead could rarely persist for long due to their inherent instability... but for the time they "lived," they could be absolute menaces. As they were effectively summoned monsters, they didn't have the same restrictions as regular Truesouls either, meaning their levels of power could truly reach absurd levels. That is to say, it was entirely possible to create a flesh golem capable of fighting and killing the Prima Guardian on its lonesome.

That it was possible didn't mean that anyone was capable of doing so, though. This was where one of the big differences between the Church and the Risen came in: the requirement of skill. The Risen required skilled necromancers and intelligent undead to control and create their armies and monstrosities. Even if they could combine their powers, having hundreds of necromancers bind and control a flesh golem together, they still needed the skill to do all this. Because if they didn't control it... well, let's just say there were plenty of stories across the multiverse of people creating monsters they failed to control, ending in their own downfalls. So, skill was still a massive requirement.

Contrarily, the rituals and methods of the Holy Church were absurdly simplistic. It wasn't difficult at all to teach even average people to create some of their rituals, with practically no skill or power required from anyone in the process.

Of course, the effectiveness and efficiency would improve if those conducting the rituals were more skilled, and some of the more advanced methods did require skilled individuals, but the mere fact the average folk was given options to fight back by the Holy Church was massive, and the primary reason they could thrive in the multiverse – even if the price of that was extreme sacrifices.

Now, all of this isn't to say that these two factions preferred using means like this. Alright, the Risen would nearly always raise armies of undead; that was only to be expected, but if they could avoid the more risky rituals, they certainly would.

The Milky Way Galaxy was quite lucky in this regard. Working with Ell'Hakan and having a good pool of talented individuals, the Holy Church didn't need to sacrifice people but could hunt down the Guardians without taking any such methods into use.

In the same way, the one planet controlled by the Risen got help from Earth, which included Casper, a Risen blessed by the Blightfather himself and a powerful fighter in his own right. Additionally, if they needed more help, Casper could get it, as asking for Jake, the Sword Saint, or someone else to lend a hand was far preferable to taking the risk of creating some abomination of stitched-together flesh and souls.

Things were far from as positive across the rest of the universe, though, and many factions wished they had the methods of these two factions in their arsenal. Wished they at least had the option of giving their lives to kill the Prima Guardian and not just die in vain.

Alas... there was a reason the Court of Shadows reached that twenty-two percent evaluation.

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Chapter 958: Black Flag

The ninety-third universe had entered its busiest period ever since the integration, at least from the perspective of the enlightened races. The vast, vast majority were fighting regular Primas in what most expected to be a years-long struggle to kill as many as they could before the Prima Guardian would be naturally released. At that point, the plan wasn't even necessarily to instantly engage the Prima Guardian but to keep hunting Primas and building strength to eventually beat the boss.

All across the universe, planets began to fall to the Prima Invasions. Others had joined their local galaxy's Prima Guardian Alliance to fight back in groups and make coalitions, while a third group had chosen to flee off their planets. Most planets who actively participated in the event had chosen to join the alliance, but many never even had the choice. Because World Leaders had one more shitty way to fuck over their own worlds.

Jake had never seen it himself as he hadn't elected to join the Prima Guardian Alliance, but if a planet that had earlier voted to join the alliance started the system event without the World Leader on the planet, they would no longer be considered part of it. The teleportation circle would stop working, and they would not be able to get any help.

Rejoining the alliance was easy enough. The World Leader just had to return. Without them acting as Key Holders, the event simply couldn't function normally... but some World Leaders didn't care. They had abandoned their planets for good and looked to greener pastures elsewhere in the multiverse, leaving all those who once put their trust in them for dead.

That, or the entire planet had been evacuated... though this didn't really happen. Teleporting that many people to another universe or even another planet was just way too expensive and not worth it. An evacuation would only mean bringing along those of "value."

Those with high levels or with high potential, family members of these people, individuals with certain unique skills or abilities, people with relations to divine figures... but the common man? The median citizen? They would be left to face a Prima invasion all on their lonesome, utterly chanceless.

To clarify, this scenario was very rare. Most World Leaders wouldn't abandon their planets, as it would ruin their Paths, and even more didn't have the possibility of leaving in the first place. Those with the means of escape, more often than not, had responsibilities or divine factions expecting them to stay and secure the planet for them.

Plus, the event was designed to be beatable for the vast majority of planets. The system wasn't known to doom worlds that, at the very least, tried their best to fight back. This isn't to say many of these worlds wouldn't fall... but they would have at least stood a chance.

As an example, Olliandra's planet would have easily handled the event had she not idiotically released the Prima Guardian as soon as possible, making them face the strongest version their planet could ever see. If they had just killed Primas for a year or two before freeing the Prima Guardian, they would not only have grown stronger, but the Guardian would have weakened.

Luckily, most World Leaders were wiser and less drunk on success than Olliandra and approached the event carefully. Planets with divine influence seeped into their culture, and leadership had a far higher success rate, too. Plus, they had more wisdom granted by their gods telling them not to be idiots and take dumb chances.

In the ninety-third universe, there were nearly innumerable galaxies, more planets than anyone knew, and countless conflicts taking place between different factions... yet it wasn't hard to find the one galaxy that most gods and factions generally paid the most attention to. With two Chosen of peak-level gods, it was only to be expected that something exciting was bound to happen, and truly, the Milky Way Galaxy did quickly prove itself a massive outlier, not only due to these two Chosen but a third anomaly nobody knew about:

The entity simply known as "I."

Jake had a rather unique perspective on this system event in that he found it somewhat counterintuitive by design. Most system events would naturally grow harder with time, but this one was quite the opposite. For every day that passed since it began, it only got easier. The Primas all seemed unable to progress or gain any levels, while the Prima Guardians only got weaker due to the event's design. Shit, just sitting around or hiding in a hole without killing any Primas would make the boss weaker once it naturally broke out, as per the description of the event:

“The Prima Guardian will be sealed within the Prima Vessel for the first 1000 days after arrival. Each day that passes, the Prima Guardian shall break one of the chains sealing it, expending some of its power to regain its freedom...”

And then there was, of course, the second section that Jake and everyone had been actively taking much advantage of:

“...Defend, attack, and hunt down every Prima, knowing that every slain Prima empowers the remaining seals on the Prima Guardian, forcing it to expend even more energy to regain its freedom, thus making it weaker once fully unsealed...”

Despite what it said about having to break the chains, they had discovered slaying Primas before manually freeing the Prima Guardian also contributed to it coming out weakened. Why it worked exactly like that, Jake didn't know, and honestly, he wasn't going to look for logic when it came to stuff like those chains.

While the chains did seem to physically exist, they were as much metaphysical seals, seeped in system-fuckery, as they were actual constraints. All Jake knew was that the Prima Guardians got weaker with every passing day, no matter what, and killing a Prima would make the Guardian weaker still.

This did result in the last three months of Jake's life being a lot more boring than he'd hoped. The Prima Guardians just got easier and easier to kill, with most of his time spent just traveling around getting to the Prima Vessels with a slow World Leader.

Now, there was actually a way to make this process faster, as Jake learned something after his fourth planet visit. Something that would certainly help contribute to people being afraid of another World Leader who had already killed their own Prima Guardian visiting.

Jake learned that another feature of his special ring was the ability to absorb the keys from other World Leaders. In other words, he had the option of killing other World Leaders if he so desired and stealing their key. Usually, when a World Leader died during the event, the key would simply go to the Prima Guardian, even if the Guardian didn't kill the World Leader personally.

When this knowledge began to spread across the communication channels of the Prima Guardian Alliance, everyone got a lot more reluctant to invite other World Leaders to their planets out of fear. Jake also heard a few instances of Ell'Hakan killing World Leaders and taking their keys, though it didn't seem to cause many issues for him, as his alliance of sycophants would let him do anything.

One would think that this revelation caused a lot of problems for Jake and his ability to find planets willing to have him visit, but that was far from the case.

Kindroth was a godsend when it came to handling the members of the system-made Prima Guardian Alliance. As the Voice of the One and leader of such a massive civilization, his word held a lot of sway, and as a member of the alliance for years, he had earned plenty of respect and possessed many allies. When the mercenaries and their planets began to also echo the elf's words, Jake had more planets than he had time to visit. Sure, inviting him was a risk, but so was getting slaughtered by Primas, and having someone kill the Prima Guardian for you to weaken all the regular Primas and allow the local wildlife to also fight back against the invasion was quite an attractive prospect. For original chapters go to **novel**·fire·net

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Jake also wasn't alone in helping out hunt down Primas for the alliance Kindroth had gained them access to. When the Sword Saint soon returned with a dead Guardian under his belt, Kindroth was initially skeptical until he learned the Sword Saint was also one of the top ten people of their universe. He was downright flabbergasted when he also met Vesperia, Sylphie, and the Fallen King, who'd stopped by before heading to their next planet. When he later learned about all the others like Arnold... yeah, the guy didn't hold back.

"How in the fuck did you manage to gather a planet of freaks like this? No, why does the system even allow this to happen? Shit, when I imagine if I'd chosen to really go hard on the neutrality stance and risked having to face you and your freaky group... yeah, this is straight-up unfair," the elf had complained loudly while it was just the two of them, much to Jake's amusement.

Jake couldn't really say anything, though, as the situation was absurd. He could also give the guy who'd helped facilitate Jake clearing forty-three Prima Guardians in three months a bit of leeway, and from the looks of it, things were only speeding up.

Through Kindroth's efforts, the planets he had yet to get to began to actively prepare for Jake to head there, with the elf sending help to make that happen. They placed teleportation circles closer to the Prima Vessels and – annoyingly so – supported them in killing more Primas.

Okay, Jake shouldn't complain about them killing Primas, as that had to be done no matter what and to help reduce losses, but it just sucked for the released boss to get even weaker. It was bad enough that even the Sword Saint commented on the decreased difficulty.

All together, Earth had killed over a hundred Prima Guardians by now, and that wasn't counting those from the Holy Church who had left to help their faction and didn't return to Earth to check in or anything. It did count the planets Vesperia had visited with the others, the one handled by Casper and the Risen, and Caleb and Maria's efforts.

Things were definitely going well... but as expected, something unexpected had to happen.

Right at this very moment, Jake wasn't in a rush to head off to kill more Prima Guardians. After he returned to the Prima Vessel on Earth to check in with Arnold and the teleporter the scientist was working on, he was promptly called to the map by the Sword Saint, who'd returned not that much earlier.

Looking at it, the map had changed a lot since three months ago. So many planets were green now, having replaced the blue colors of before. When it came to the red ones, Jake wasn't even sure any of them had been cleared outside of their own, though he was certain at least some of them had. A few of them had definitely fallen, though.

But that wasn't why Jake had been called to the map.

A new color had shown up on the map of the galaxy. They had seen green flags for cleared planets, red for those handling the event alone, blue for those who'd joined the system-made Prima Guardian Alliance, and finally, gray for the planets that had fallen to the invasion. Now, there was one more: black.

He was joined by the Sword Saint as the two of them looked at it, the old man asking with narrowed eyes. "How did this even happen?"

"I'm not sure," Jake said, shaking his head. "But I'm pretty sure it was green before, so..."

Frowning, the old man looked certain that the true answer wouldn't be something he liked.

The criteria for a planet turning black was something Jake wasn't sure could happen, and he certainly saw no reason why it would. A planet turning gray on the map meant the Prima Guardian had killed the World Leader and claimed the Planetary Pylon, while green meant the World Leader had killed the Guardian and claimed the planet...

Black meant no one had claimed the Pylon.

That no one would ever claim it... because it signified the destruction of the Planetary Core.

As for what planet it had happened on? The planet cleared first alongside Jake and Ell'Hakan's, done by the creature known as "I."

Miranda went over all the daily reports, of which there were honestly far too many due to recent happenings. She had to be quick, too, as she had several meetings lined up, courtesy of Jake and his pals, who'd been way too busy.

When they killed Prima Guardians and "saved" all these planets, the local World Leader's response was almost comically predictable. Every single time, a delegation would apply to visit Earth within a day or two, and Miranda naturally saw no cause to ever reject these. In fact, she welcomed them.

One part was definitely because it would actively hamper the efforts of Ell'Hakan and the story he was telling of uniting the galaxy under his influence and definitely also because it would give them potentially valuable allies should the conflict escalate further.

Secondly... this was really great for her Path. Miranda had gotten so many levels and learned a lot over these last few months. Having to deal with so many different cultures, World Leaders, and people of high political skill and standing was a constant challenge that repeatedly pushed her forward.

There was one person who pushed her more than anyone else, though.

Miranda had met a lot of different World Leaders and political figures, both on Earth and when she went to the Order. Within her dream skill granted by the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon, she also had many encounters... yet the most frightening political figure she had encountered thus far was the elf she had a meeting with in a few minutes.

She was painfully aware that the only reason things were going so well during this event wasn't due to her own political prowess but the skills of the one known as the Voice of the One. At first, based on Jake's description, she had expected a conman who'd hoodwinked his planet into thinking he was some semi-divine figure through lies and manipulation. It was not a good first impression.

However, when she met him, reality soon struck her. Miranda had believed herself pretty adept at dealing with other World Leaders and political figures of high influence, yet after her first meeting with Kindroth, Miranda felt she had a long way to go.

Uniting an entire planet with over a hundred billion citizens into a homogenous, well-functioning society was not a fluke. His ability to invoke trust in over two hundred World Leaders, making them allow Jake and others to teleport to their planets also wasn't luck. He was good, to the level of it being intimidating.

In the eyes of many, Miranda was the "leader" of this budding alliance, with Jake as the figurehead. But reality felt different, as Kindroth held a far more central position. He was the one the other World Leaders trusted and followed. He was the one they showed loyalty toward. Sure, they were afraid of and almost seemed to revere people like Jake and the Sword Saint, but Kindroth ended up with much of the credit for their achievements as he was the one who introduced them as Prima Guardian slayers.

But... it wasn't like Miranda could really say anything. He always made sure to refer these World Leaders to her, and whenever they met, he was very respectful and made it clear he did view her as someone with a higher position in the hierarchy than him. Yet the lingering feeling she was slowly being replaced couldn't help but sneak up on her... at least until the meeting they had that day, as the elf entered the office right as she was done with her paperwork.

After a bit of small talk and discussing recent events, such as Arnold reporting he believed a special teleporter to reach all the planets was soon ready, Kindroth seemed to turn a bit more serious as he looked her in the eye.

"I want you to know I am no cause for concern," the elf said with a comforting smile. "And becoming one would be a foolish endeavor. You have the trust of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his comrades, making your position unshakeable. Right now, it may not seem that way, but this situation is only temporary. History will not speak of me as anything but the person who assisted the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his Court Witch in achieving their goals, and that is the position I am comfortable with. I have no ambitions of reaching for a position I do not belong in. Besides, who else could possibly deal with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as well as you? If it was me, I would actively feel my lifespan reducing with every report of his most recent shenanigans."

His words were exactly why Miranda found the elf frightening, because she found them genuinely comforting. Kindroth always seemed to know what to say and how to act around people. From Jake, she learned the guy was "pretty chill" and relaxed. He didn't realize this was part of what Kindroth could do. The elf had realized Jake wasn't a person who liked others being overly respectful, but preferred casualness, so he acted casual around Jake. His level of insight wasn't something a skill could grant; it was pure talent. So was his level of guts to stand up to Jake during their first encounter. That wasn't some act... though Miranda did suspect it was perhaps a gamble. One few would have dared to attempt.

Looking back at Kindroth, Miranda returned his smile. "Jake can indeed be a handful to deal with, but such is life. Thank you for your words, and I hope we can both continue carrying out our roles well. I look forward to learning from your continued exemplary performance."

"I shall do my utmost," Kindroth said as he stood up and bowed before saying their goodbyes, Miranda staring after the elf while he left.

Even if she remained cautious around the guy... she couldn't argue he was an incredibly valuable asset to their cause and she understood why he had been perhaps the top person in the universe that Ell'Hakan had been clamoring to get on his side.

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Chapter 959: The Impetus Takes Flight

Question of the day: what happens when a Planetary Core breaks?

Nothing good would be the short answer. For a more detailed answer, it was all a bit more complicated, with many factors in play. One of the main factors was the method by which the core had been broken.

Breaking it through pure power wasn't something a C-grade was capable of. Not even a B-grade would be able to accomplish it, which quickly made Jake write off that the dead planet had its core outright destroyed. Instead, it was likely a method of more subtle means that had been deployed.

Jake knew annoyingly much about planet-wide sacrificial rituals due to Villy and his constant semi-joking, and one of the primary methods of doing such a ritual was using the core. The Planetary Core functioned as the wellspring of mana and energy for the entire planet, and it was what held the entire thing together. Corrupting it would thus lead to the corruption of the whole planet, and using the core as the catalyst for a massive ritual to kill every living being on a planet was truly the best method.

When the Planetary Core was transformed into a Planetary Pylon, things got even more complicated still. From Jake's talks with Kindroth and Miranda, he learned that it was entirely possible to use their influence and control over the Pylon to mess with it. Miranda even mentioned that one could likely rig the entire planet to blow only using the control granted by the Planetary Pylon.

This wouldn't be something that could happen in a day, though. Not a few months, either. This was why Jake was so confused about what had happened to the planet now turned black on the map. It was especially confusing why this creature known as "I" had done it. It had been the only living creature on the planet... why would it have to go out of its way to seemingly spend the last three months also destroying the core?

All that would accomplish was to make sure the planet would never recover. That no new life would appear. It would effectively just turn it into a giant dead rock, susceptible to the destructive forces floating in the universe, as one of the primary functions of the core was to maintain and regulate the atmosphere, and with that gone, it was open season for all kinds of meteorites and whatnot.

Jake was wracking his brain as to why anyone would bother with that, as the Sword Saint did offer some potential explanations.

"Is it possible the core was absorbed or transformed in some way? Perhaps this "I" was capable of devouring it?" the old man proposed.

"That isn't possible," Jake shook his head. "While there are creatures that can consume Planetary Cores out there, we would be utterly fucked if we were dealing with one here, as the power required to do something like that is ridiculous. If some kind of ritual had been used to absorb the core's energy it would also have taken way longer than a few months. No, the core must have been corrupted somehow."

"Would a C-grade truly be capable of such levels of magical corruption?" the Sword Saint questioned.

"I would be capable of doing it," Jake just answered in a dry tone, earning him a judging glance.

"What? I didn't say I would do it," Jake muttered. If he remembered the work he'd done alongside Temlat and his study of planetary rituals the Viper made him do for funsies, he believed that if he used Eternal Hunger as a catalyst of corruption along with-

"Naturally, you would never do anything so crass," the old man cut off Jake's thoughts. "The question still remains, though. Why would someone who'd already taken control of their planet choose to destroy it?"

"The only explanation I can find is that it's part of this creature's Path. Clearly, it isn't some unintelligent beast, as it requires more than just raw power to corrupt a core, especially when one considers that it must have entered the Prima Vessel after killing the Guardian, teleported to the core, and then done whatever it did there... in fact, the mere fact it was capable of doing that must mean this creature was the World Leader," Jake frowned.

"Doesn't that mean it's enlightened?" the Sword Saint raised an eyebrow.

"I would assume so unless there are system rules we are not yet aware of," Jake sighed. It was entirely possible there were rules or exceptions, especially on planets with so few people on them. Either way, this entire situation was one they had to watch closely.

"Definitely make sure Miranda doesn't accept any applications from this creature to visit," the Sword Saint said in a semi-joking tone, shaking his head.

"If I really had to tell her something like that, we would have even bigger problems to deal with."

The two of them stayed there a bit longer, talking about the latest planets they had visited. No one else came to the Prima Vessel during this time, which was to be expected. Only people from Earth who had gone to help other planets used the Vessel,

and they didn't even have to do that anymore if they didn't want to. The latest_episodes are on the [novel-fire.net](http://www.novel-fire.net)

Originally, they didn't have any plans of making a Prima Guardian Alliance teleportation circle to allow people to visit Earth from other planets in the Prima Guardian Alliance, but after some further deliberation, they made one anyway. In their first plan, Miranda wanted to send people to the planets they "saved" in order to not expose Earth to potential bad actors or to give away too much about their homeworld and its peculiarities. After the entire Ell'Hakan fiasco, people also weren't that keen on the potential of people affiliated with the enemy Chosen sneaking in.

However, it quickly became clear Jake and the others were just too damn efficient in their work, and there was no way Miranda or those she trusted could keep up. When they established this new teleportation circle, they wanted it far away from the Prima Vessel. Making the circle had been incredibly easy as the system had made it to be, and they placed it in a secluded small city with teleporters capable of taking the visitors elsewhere on Earth while not taking them straight to Haven or another major city from the get-go.

As an added bonus, Arnold commented this process of making the magic circle had been beneficial for his research. So definitely worth it.

"I should head out again," the Sword Saint said after they spoke a bit more. "Can't fall behind Ell'Hakan and his alliance."

"True, true," Jake nodded, also preparing to go help out another world. The thing about keeping up with Ell'Hakan also wasn't a joke. His alliance was clearing planets fast, and while Jake honestly didn't have a complete overview of who had done more, he had a feeling the other Chosen wasn't that far behind if he was behind at all.

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So, nothing to do but get back in the saddle and kill some more would-be word-ending bosses as if they were some annoying chore that had to be dealt with.

One thing did definitely suck. As was already touched upon, the Prima Guardians had just gotten easier and easier with time. Not only did this mean Ell'Hakan's alliance could clear planets more easily with their elite teams, but it also meant that Jake's experience gain had flatlined.

Maybe he shouldn't complain too much, though... 3 levels – or 4 if he counted the first one on Olliandra's planet – wasn't bad progress at all in only three months.

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 294 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 296 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 286 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 287 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

System events were well-known for having what were effectively hidden experience amplifiers, primarily due to the many Records associated with any event. Knowing this, Jake wasn't sure if he should be happy or sad about his level gain, though he was fairly certain he wouldn't really get more than one, maybe two, more, even if he killed hundreds more Guardians.

While there certainly were extra Records associated with the event, Jake was still killing monsters he could pretty effortlessly slay, and their levels were only dropping the further the event went on. The uniqueness of the Records gained also reduced with every Prima Guardian kill, as while every Guardian was different, they still had many of their Records in common.

Killing one Prima Guardian was impressive... ten was incredible... but a hundred and it just turned into a regular unnoteworthy hunting trip. Jake effectively felt like a hunter regulating population numbers, with the desired population number of Prima Guardians equalling zero across the galaxy.

Jake saw the Sword Saint walk off as he quickly referred to the updated list of planets looking for help made by Kindroth and the associated code he was meant to put in the application description. With it mentally noted, he went toward the teleporter, ready to kill yet another Guardian and save yet another world. Truly not too dissimilar to a regular day job.

Kindroth smiled as he looked at the city called Haven, admiring its simplicity. The touch of magic was surprisingly light compared to his own world, but that did have its own charm. What was also very charming were the people of the planet. They were indeed an interesting bunch, from the monsters to the enlightened, who were quite frankly also rather monstrous in their own rights.

Miranda, the Court Witch, was also something of an interesting figure. He would readily admit she was more powerful than he was, and while she still had much room for growth in her role as the de facto leader of the planet, she was adequate, if still lacking. Unsurprising, considering her young age as a human. They only lived for a few decades before the system, after all. As an elf with quite a few centuries under his belt before the integration even arrived, he had relied on the wisdom of age during much of his Path.

Because of the value he put on wisdom, Kindroth did find it confusing why the Court Witch was the leader in the first place. While their interaction had been brief, Kindroth had met the swordsman people called the Sword Saint – a title nearly as arrogant as his own. Never had he thought he would meet a human from this new universe who made him feel like a young man once more, nor to meet someone so wise from age. This Sword Saint was a frightening existence in the eyes of Kindroth, possessing not only power but extreme political prowess and insight. If he had been the leader, it would have been fully understandable.

Sure, he was a member of this World Council and clearly held a lot of influence, but it would just make more sense if he was the dominant voice. From what Kindroth had gathered, though, the swordsman hadn't sought the position of leader but wished to focus on his blade. An odd sentiment, but likely what was required to reach his level of power.

Speaking of power... the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Jake Thayne. Kindroth had spent a good while with him but still couldn't get a full read on the man. He seemed simple. Oddly uncomplicated for someone of his status. If not for his overwhelming power, and the unsettling feeling he gave off when he looked at you, Kindroth could easily have confused him for a regular hunter. Clearly, he was far more than that, though.

The primary reason he was sure of that was due to Ell'Hakan. The Nahoom was the most self-assured and confident person Kindroth had ever met. Yet the elf had felt it when the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was mentioned during their meetings. There was a level of apprehension and doubt when it came to dealing with the hunter.

Then, there was, of course, the title of Harbinger of Primeval Origins. A title not claimed or taken by the hunter but granted and cemented by the system. Kindroth still wasn't entirely certain what it meant, but he did know it was related to the fact a True Royal and two other monsters of extreme power seemed to have been born or evolved into what they were due to this power.

For the Chosen to hold powers like that and also appear like a simple hunter was... puzzling.

As Kindroth was stuck in thought overlooking the city, he soon got a message that Jake had left the planet and where he'd gone. When Kindroth saw the planet he'd chosen, he couldn't help but let a small smile creep to his lips. Finally, the time had come, and he muttered to himself as he looked at the setting sun in the distance.

"And thus the impetus takes flight."

The scalekin lizard World Leader felt excitement in his heart when he heard they were next on the list. He had quickly gone to fetch his queen, a winged beastkin, and her response was equally elated and relieved.

They needed the help, and they needed it badly.

Their planet had, to put it nicely, not been united leading up to this Prima Guardian event at all. They had a mix of so many different races and could never truly get along and form one cohesive society. Before the system arrived, half of the world had been at war with one another, and the fact everyone got stats and power only escalated things. Entire races had already been wiped out or enslaved, and the fighting was far from done.

The only way the lizard man had managed to become the World Leader was because they had to pick one, and at that stage of their conflict, he had been the most influential. Since then, he had lost and gained power, with overall everything a mess.

It was so bad that many on their planet hadn't taken the entire event seriously, even if the scalekin and a few other leaders had tried to make them. Despite the Primas ravaging the planet, the war hadn't stopped... in fact, some factions took advantage of the chaos caused by the Primas to try and assassinate influential or powerful figures in other countries.

As things were going, they were headed toward destruction. It wasn't even certain the Prima Guardian needed to be released before they tore themselves apart. The only slightly positive thing was that some stability had begun to emerge in the last month and a half as factions banded together. The scalekin World Leader managed to leverage his position to gather a coalition of smaller forces, and in response, other factions had also come together to oppose him.

But then... then everything turned to shit. During all the commotion, no one had kept the Prima Guardian Alliance teleportation circles a secret, meaning many different factions had their own. This didn't seem like a big problem until one day, it suddenly was as the coalition that opposed the scalekin called in help from across the stars. The permission settings had been messed up for sure, as the scalekin had incompetently just not thought about it, which was the cause of his downfall.

In a single week, the scalekin was branded a usurper who had unrightfully claimed the title of World Leader. Two other World Leaders had appeared on the planet, and as things were, things were bleak... until the Voice of the One reached out.

He gave them hope. They had believed that fighting the opposing coalition would be impossible due to who they had allied with, but now the scalekin saw a chance.

For who would be better than the alliance formed by the Chosen of the Malefic One to defend them against those backed by the Celestial Child?

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Chapter 960: Incompetence All Around

A large group was gathered in the spacious tent as the teleportation circle lit up. The scalekin World Leader stood side by side with his queen, surrounded by those who remained loyal to him and their tribal alliance. He knew many were skeptical when he told them help was coming, and when the teleportation circle fully activated, the disappointment from some of them was palpable.

A single figure appeared in the center of the circle, wearing a dark hooded cloak and a wood-like mask, revealing only two eyes reminiscent of a beast more than a human. In truth, he didn't strike the scalekin as that impressive, but he knew looks could be extremely deceiving in the multiverse. There was no way to tell how powerful someone truly was simply by looking at them.

"I greet the Chosen of the Malefic Viper," the scalekin World Leader bowed politely, his wife and others following suit despite their reservations. "We humbly welcome you to our planet."

The human quickly regarded the scalekin, and it felt as if his very soul was laid bare as the man responded. "You're the World Leader, I take it?"

"That is correct, my lord," the scalekin said, his respectful tone now even more genuine.

"Good, then let's not waste more time than necessary and head straight for the Prima Vessel," the Chosen continued, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone.

"That is..." the scalekin muttered.

"What is it? If there are no teleporters nearby and we have to travel a bit, that's fine, I just hope you aren't a slowpoke," the human continued, still speaking so casually it was truly shocking. Perhaps... didn't he know?

"The... the Prima Vessel is not currently under our control..."

A second passed before the human scratched the back of his head. "Alright... it's pretty clear there's a story here, so let me hear it."

Jake would definitely come to regret hearing their story, as it was not only cliché but also pretty boring.

Warring factions, lots of racism because of the many different races who didn't like how others looked, century-long blood feuds between different clans because some chick

married one guy over another, and so many damn twists and turns around who different clans allied with at different times. Honestly, it was a shitshow.

All of which Jake, quite frankly, didn't care about. He did care about the last part, though.

"They have invited other World Leaders from planets that have already cleared their own Prima Guardians and did this before the teleportation permissions were locked down... and while the lockdown does mean they can't bring in more invaders, we remain severely outnumbered and have cause to believe these World Leader brought along powerful allies. With me being the World Leader, we are also disproportionately targeted by the Primas and are struggling," the scalekin World Leader explained, Jake surprised at and only really noting the presence of two other World Leaders.

He didn't even need to be told where they were from either, as the answer was obvious. Still, the scalekin told him.

"These World Leaders are allies of the Celestial Child and are sent here to claim the planet. I... was also approached by the Chosen, and we had an agreement, which was why I kept teleportation open for all from the alliance, but..." the scalekin admitted, though he didn't look like he felt good about it.

"But you were betrayed. What a shocker," Jake sighed. He had already released a Pulse, and... he wouldn't even say he was in a city. It was just flatland with a few thousand tents and very temporary-looking buildings spread about. Clearly, this wasn't the most stable of factions.

The part about the teleportation circles was at least a bit understandable. The scalekin wouldn't have believed those who teleported there from planets part of the alliance would join the enemy, but here the guy was, very much regretting his prior choices.

From Ell'Hakan's point of view, siding with the other coalition of factions who fought the scalekin and his tribes probably made the most sense. They had more people, a stronger fighting force, and likely also a better leader than the scalekin Jake was looking at because the guy really didn't give off leader vibes. His level was pretty good, though.

[Scalekin – lvl 280]

In fact, the levels Jake saw when he briefly scanned people in the tent were pretty good. It turns out that being on a planet going through constant war with other factions ever since the integration was a great way to gain a lot of levels, even if it also meant the planet had pretty sucky population numbers.

"Yes, I was fooled, betrayed, and taken advantage of," the scalekin nodded in shame as he clenched his fists. "I believed the words of the Celestial Child, that he would-"

“Why do you keep calling him that when he fucked you over?” Jake asked, raising an eyebrow. “No reason to show such respect for some manipulative sack of shit.”

The scalekin looked about to answer as someone from the back decided to get involved in the conversation. A large horned man who looked a bit like a minotaur stood up as he stared daggers at Jake. This minotaur-looking beastkin wasn't the only one either, as several more looked uncomfortable with what Jake had said, including even the queen at the World Leader's side, but it was only the minotaur guy who was dumb enough to yell loudly:

“How dare a mere human disrespect the Celestial Child! Your pathetic kind belong only in-“

Jake looked at the man, his eyes glowing for a second as he decided to be nice and only froze the guy. With a low sigh, Jake silenced the room entirely as he spoke calmly.

“One more interruption, and it won't end with a warning. That goes for all of you.”

The scalekin did react quickly as he seemingly sent some telepathic message, and two people grabbed the frozen and drooling minotaur and dragged him out of the tent. With him gone, the scalekin went as far as to go down on one knee, the shock from many of those there not something they could contain.

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“I sincerely apologize for the disrespect from both myself and the representative of the Iron Bull clan. While it is no excuse, we have a less-than-positive history with the human race who once lived here before they all died out a few decades before the integration. They had enslaved much of the planet a very long time ago, with our history books emphasizing the evil nature of man... of course, we now know better, and I can only beg for your forgiveness,” the scalekin said, clearly trying to gather some sympathy points with his historical explanation.

Again, Jake seriously didn't care about the history lesson, he just wanted to get things moving and not have anyone and everyone interrupting him. Maybe he noticed Jake's disinterest, but at least the scalekin had the sense to continue without any prompting.

“As for the matters regarding the... other Chosen... I truly meant nothing by it. It's simply the title we referred to him as and the one he introduced himself with. That, and I cannot rule out the existence of Bloodline manipulation from his side, still controlling my mind and the minds of many others who have met him.”

Okay, that last part was a bit bullshit. Ell'Hakan didn't control people's minds, just their emotions. Simply being aware of the Chosen's ability made it several times less effective, and often the negative emotions born from being told you had been

manipulated into having a positive view of the orange fuck overshadowed any others, amplified or not. But Jake really didn't want to enter an entire conversation about that as he steered the topic toward why he was there.

"You said the Prima Vessel was under the control of these other clans and the two World Leaders helping them, correct?" Jake questioned.

"Yes, they are guarding it, so I cannot approach and enter," the scalekin nodded.

"Are they afraid you will release the Prima Guardian?" Jake asked, trying to get a feel for how strong these two World Leaders who had arrived were.

"I do not believe that is what they fear. They instead don't want me to hide in there and make it impossible for them to gain my key. I have heard they possess the ability to take the keys from other World Leaders if they slay them, and I fear that is what they plan to do. Afterward, they will likely release the Guardian, slay it, and... then I do not know their plan," the World Leader admitted with a sigh.

"And why are they not just hunting you down?" Jake kept pressing.

"They have tried to a few times, but we move around and attempt to make ourselves difficult to pin down. Also, they do not appear to be in any kind of rush, as they keep gathering more unaffiliated clans and tribes under their banner as they slay Primas. Once more, I do not know the cause for their lack of urgency."

Jake had a good theory of why they were not in a hurry... why would they with such an incompetent and cowardly World Leader? Shit, maybe they were even trying to... *oh, yeah, that orange fuck would totally go for that kind of story.*

There was a very good chance they weren't necessarily aiming to even kill this World Leader but would instead wear him down until he surrendered and willingly submitted himself before them to save his own hide. Ell'Hakan was going for a story as the one who united the galaxy, and making a warring planet come together would definitely track. Also... being known for killing other World Leaders and "stealing" their planets would likely make it harder for Ell'Hakan to keep recruiting.

It also explained why they hadn't just killed this group if they were truly that much more superior. Of course, it could still be that the people Ell'Hakan had just sent were incompetent, but Jake liked his own theory better.

Not that any of it ultimately mattered. If Ell'Hakan's plans interfered with what Jake was there for, there was no way they could avoid getting into a scuffle.

"Let's not wait around any longer until they decide to come for you again, then," Jake said, seeing no reason to stay around any longer. At this point, he *really* just wanted to get moving... but life had other plans.

Jake saw the winged beastkin queen beside the World Leader shift a little, and he was pretty sure she sent some telepathic message to the scalekin, which made the guy hesitate. "Are... are you sure it's wise to not make a proper plan for our approach? Assess the situation properly first?"

For a second, Jake wondered if this entire thing was really worth it. Why was he even helping some clearly unpopular and untalented World Leader in the first place? He wouldn't kill the guy as that was one of the things he'd agreed with Kindroth, and Miranda would fuck up all their future plans as convincing a known killer of World Leaders to visit would be hard. Actually, this fitted well with why Ell'Hakan didn't just kill the guy, huh? Either way... man, did Jake just want to knock out the guy and drag him to the Vessel at this point.

"We do have a proper plan. Me. Now let's go," Jake insisted... yet the damn scalekin kept hesitating, and Jake was pretty damn sure he knew what caused it. More accurately, who caused it.

Turning to the winged beastkin woman, he stared straight at her as he caught her attention. She stared back, and Jake easily saw how damn nervous she was. She was way too nervous for this conversation, almost as if she didn't want any of this to be happening.

Not only is the World Leader incompetent, his own damn wife isn't even fully on his side, Jake sighed internally before she spoke in an accusatory tone.

"Or is there a reason people here wouldn't want you to go for some reason... now why would that be?" Jake said with a smile as he looked at the wife. "I do find it bold of you to try and hide in front of me so openly. Did you really think I wouldn't notice? I'm a hunter. I specialize in sensing clues and uncovering truth. So, do you want to take this opportunity to fess up yourself, or would you prefer my interpretation of what you've done?"

To be clear, Jake had no proof and was one hundred percent bluffing; he just knew she had done *something* shady. He wasn't even sure exactly what she had done, and outright accusing her of something specific could give away the fact he really had no idea. Luckily, the queen wasn't smarter than her dear husband. Jake's staredown probably also helped convince her.

Turning to her husband, who looked at her with utter confusion, she practically screamed her explanation.

"I... it was the only way! How long has this war been going on? How long can it continue? We need to unite, or this damned system event will be our end, and we have clearly shown we aren't capable of coming together without outside help. You know they promised stability and safety! Help with the Prima Guardian! Why are you so stubbornly resisting when assistance is offered!? You said they betrayed us first... nobody

betrayed anyone. The Celestial Child made a deal with everyone, not just you! He made a promise to this planet, and you're the only one still refusing to see that! I... I will not raise our child in this kind of world!"

The scalekin looked at her with wide eyes. "You... you're with child? I..." UPDATE FROM *novel●fire●net*

Watching this family drama unfold before him, Jake regretted his decision of not just kidnapping the World Leader and dragging him to the Prima Vessel. His patience was truly being tested, but he had to resist the urge to do anything.

Jake couldn't help but think about who the "good" guys truly were on this planet. One side had the majority of citizens and was still expanding, with more clans joining them all the time, while the other was ruled by a World Leader desperately holding onto what little power he had despite the popular opinion of the population.

But... all that wasn't really his problem. He looked on as the scalekin and winged beastkin were talking in a hushed tone, half of the conversation clearly also happening telepathically, as emotions were running high. Jake decided to give them a choice, as he cleared his throat, making the two of them shut up as they stared at Jake in fright, seemingly having forgotten he was even there.

"All of this strikes me as a waste of time, so let me offer you one of two options. Both include freeing the Prima Guardian. Either the two of you go to the Prima Vessel and meet these other World Leaders to reach some agreement, or he and I head off to the Prima Vessel. The first option also includes me coming along, but I will remain hidden unless I have a reason not to."

The two of them looked at Jake for a moment as the scalekin clenched his fists. "If... if there is a peaceful solution..."

"First option it is, then," Jake smiled. It was time to show that Ell'Hakan couldn't be the only scheming sleazebag around.

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Chapter 961: An Obvious Trap

It should be pretty clear by now that Jake didn't like any of the people he had met on this planet so far. When he first appeared from the teleporter, he was met with unfriendly gazes from all the different scalekin and beastkin, replaced by fear after he

showed off his power. The World Leader was pretty damn incompetent, his wife a backstabber, and based on the reactions of those around, half were on her side. Calling this entire “faction” led by the scalekin World Leader a shitshow was an understatement, and Jake seriously doubted how he had even gotten that title in the first place. Actually, it was probably because the guy was the strongest Jake had encountered so far...

On the other side of the conflict, there were the people who were part of Ell'Hakan's alliance. Two World Leaders Jake naturally had no idea about but assumed sucked because of the Chosen they had decided to follow. They clearly had plans of their own, more likely than not at the directions of the orange bastard.

Jake had considered what kind of response Ell'Hakan would predict Jake to have and how he would use Jake's actions against him. He also considered how Miranda would want him to handle the situation. There were many factors to consider, and ultimately, Jake ended up with a conclusion:

He genuinely didn't give a fuck about any of this... but he wouldn't play that orange fuck's game.

So, his plan was simple. Have the World Leader release the Prima Guardian, kill the Prima Guardian, and leave. No need to complicate anything. If the people sent by Ell'Hakan then decided to create any serious trouble for him, it would be on them and not Jake's fault.

Jake ended up heading out with the scalekin and winged beastkin shortly after, despite their continued nervousness. Well, Jake called it heading out, but in reality, it was the two of them traveling, with Jake following along with Unseen Hunter active. He purposefully made himself known to the scalekin so the guy could take him along when they used the teleporters, but otherwise didn't interact with them or did anything to give himself away.

Once they were done teleporting as close as they could to the Prima Vessel, they would have to fly the rest of the way, a journey that should take about five or six hours. Jake could definitely do it faster, as it turned out the husband was indeed a bit of a slowpoke when it came to travel speed.

Being out in the open and just flying across the landscape, things truly got bad. The wife and husband chatted along the way, and Jake even felt the scalekin lose track of his position due to how heated things got. In fact, he was pretty sure they both forgot he was even following along about an hour into the flight as they began to get even angrier and fight more loudly, bringing up old shit like how the beastkin's dad had never liked the scalekin in the first place.

Couldn't really blame the dad there...

Jake then learned about three affairs from the scalekin's side, one of them with the wife's cousin... which she very healthily responded to by sleeping with the scalekin's brother, nearly inciting a war between two factions as, shocker, he had also been married.

For the next four and a half hours, Jake was made to listen to two mentally deranged people and their fucked up relationship and utterly dysfunctional family dynamic, making it really no surprise why this entire planet was so truly and utterly screwed.

Yet, some-fucking-how, the two of them ended up making out sloppily in the air during the last ten minutes of the flight as it could be their "last moments together," and they somehow ended up making up. He wasn't sure how, as Jake had tuned them out as best he could... but good for them?

Jake had never been more grateful in his life that they were spotted by an enemy scout at the perimeter around the Prima Vessel. It finally made the two people with the worst marriage he had ever heard of back off from one another and look a bit more serious as they stopped flying.

In the distance, a small group of around twenty people appeared, flying in their direction. With a Pulse, Jake quickly scanned the area ahead and saw the Prima Vessel along with a few thousand people. The ground was also covered with a large formation of some kind, so they had definitely set up to give them a home turf advantage. Likely both for the scalekin World Leader and for when the Guardian would eventually be released.

"None of the World Leaders are in the group," the scalekin muttered as he saw them approach. Jake had a lot of questions due to that comment, as the guy had never mentioned he had seen the World Leaders or bothered to share their appearances, but at this point, Jake really shouldn't be surprised at the guy's lack of foresight.

About a minute later, the group arrived, and their leader stepped forward. "You must be Lord of the Curved Tail Clan and elected World Leader, correct?"

"That is me," the scalekin, who even had a shitty clan name, answered with a nod.

"I was told the Chosen of the Malefic One would also be arriving alongside you. I'm certain that he could remain hidden if he so desired, considering his vast power; however, I believe it would make things simpler if we could interact with his lordship directly," the man said, the scalekin looking surprised at the comment while throwing a glance at his wife, who just shrugged.

Great, so there were even traitors with an open line of contact in the midst of that group in the tent. Who could possibly have seen that coming? Jake asked himself sarcastically.

He'd planned on hiding, but that would probably just slow things down. Besides, he'd never actually planned to sneak around in the first place. Instead, he decided to make a proper entrance, and he quickly snuck behind the group before revealing himself.

"I'm here," Jake spoke calmly, making the group turn around in fright from the jumpscare as he'd just appeared out of thin air from their perspectives. A few even looked ready to attack, but their leader held up a hand. The elven man, who clearly wasn't a native of the planet, looked at Jake with apprehension before asking:

"I greet the Chosen of the Malefic One... and request to know his reason for being here?"

"To kill the Prima Guardian," Jake answered instantly.

"That is-" the guard squad leader responded, but Jake cut him off.

"Let's go to the Vessel," he said to the scalekin World Leader, who for a moment wasn't sure what to do, but Jake's glance made him do the wise thing and quickly nod and follow.

"Excuse me, I-"

"I see no reason or cause to waste more words or time on you," Jake threw the leader a quick look, making him shut off and back off. He did seem to send some sort of message, though, and with his Pulse, he saw the whole camp around the Vessel had already come alive. They were preparing, and part of this group leader's job had been to delay Jake at least a little.

It was almost cute that they thought any period of preparation would allow them to actually put up a fight.

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Jake took the lead as the three flew toward the Vessel, the greeting squad following them a reasonable distance behind. The scalekin looked nervous as hell, with his wife not that much better. Jake could readily admit that the two of them doing any kind of negotiations with Jake there would be hard, but honestly, wasn't that their own fault for having the worst security measures imaginable?

Shit, how dumb was it to have everyone meet him together like that in the first place instead of taking him to a private and secured room? How moronic would one have to be to have their meeting where they discussed plans in front of everyone? The answer was that Miranda would have smacked Jake over the head if he proposed doing the same.

The closer they got to the Vessel, the more people there were, and Jake soon spotted the two people who were clearly in charge of this entire expedition of Ell'Hakan's. It was an elven man and a beastkin woman, and both didn't look like natives due to their clothing and the fact one was an elf. Plus, he saw both of them had purposefully made their rings visible on their hands, signifying they were both World Leaders who had also killed their Prima Guardians.

On a quick side note, Jake really hoped his ring was better than theirs, or at least would be, as if not, he was seriously wasting his time going through all this just to kill some more Prima Guardians.

The two World Leaders below quickly flew up to greet Jake and the scalekin. Correction, they flew up to greet Jake and entirely ignored the scalekin. Honestly? Fair enough.

"We greet the Harbinger of Primeval Origins," the elven man said in a polite tone as he bowed deeply, the beastkin woman doing the same.

Jake noted three things right off the bat. The first one was what they called him. To use his title of Harbinger of Primeval Origins was already very odd as if they were purposefully avoiding saying he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper... something he recalled Ell'Hakan had also done in the past, specifically during the "apology" from the Nevermore afterparty.

Secondly was how the two were clearly tensed up, seemingly ready to battle should Jake do anything aggressive, with the people below also more than prepared to jump into action.

Third, their levels and how utterly hopeless they would be if Jake did decide to start a fight.

[Elf- lvl 279]

[Beastkin – lvl 283]

They were decent enough for their levels, and Jake guessed they would be able to kill the Prima Guardian, especially with all the people they had to help and the formation below... but Jake wasn't at the same level as these Prima Guardians. Especially not now that they were weaker than when the event first began.

"You seem quite aware of me," Jake answered after a brief pause, his words holding double meaning. It was both that they seemed to know a lot about who he was, but also that they both were watching him very carefully right now. They hid it well, but he sensed their nervousness.

"It is only natural to be aware of such an outstanding individual, especially once we learned that we share a galaxy," the elf continued. He was definitely the speaker of the two World Leaders, with the beastkin woman quite a bit stronger, there as the main fighting force. Jake could estimate she was a bit better than Olliandra from the first planet he ever visited. That is to say, impressive in the eyes of the majority but not anything to write home about for Jake.

"That makes sense," Jake just muttered, his scanning gaze making the two of them more nervous. They were definitely expecting a fight to break out at any moment... which was exactly why Jake wasn't going to just hand them one. "I would advise you to pull your people away from the Prima Vessel. We plan on freeing the Guardian, after which I will slay it." The source of this content is *novel✕fire✕net*

"This..." the elf said, looking a bit perplexed. The World Leader quickly gathered himself and rebuked Jake's words. "We have already laid the groundwork for the fight, and our strategic preparations are all complete. Would it not be preferable for us to handle it and his lordship to not waste any time on such a trivial task?"

"Oh no, it's all good. I was asked by the rightful World Leader for assistance, and who am I to reject offering a hand when I'm capable, and we all benefit from the death of the Prima Guardians?" Jake spoke, his smirk hidden beneath his mask. "Now hurry. The more time we waste, the longer the Primas remain at full power, leading to unnecessary deaths."

Jake could see the cogs turn inside the head of the elf, as Jake clearly wasn't acting as he had expected. Now, Jake didn't think they knew he would be coming to this planet in the first place, but they had known he would arrive at the Vessel once they did hear he was on the planet. Releasing a few pulses also confirmed what he had expected was going on there.

At that moment, Jake felt pretty smart for not falling into a very obvious trap.

He could always feel people observing him, though it could get a bit tougher when there were a lot of people at once to pinpoint singular observers. However, with a bit of time, he had spotted them, though. People who held odd-looking crystal balls standing all around the place, with a few hidden in the distance.

In the multiverse, there were many ways to record events and equally as many to confirm the authenticity of such recordings. One of the premier methods was the use of such crystal balls as the ones he saw people holding. They were created from recording crystals, and Jake made the educated guess these were the kind with backups. Some really high-end recording crystals could clone their records perfectly to a matching crystal somewhere else, though it often couldn't be that far away. It had to be on the same planet, at least.

The thing is, leaving the planet wasn't hard. While the scalekin World Leader had locked down people teleporting to the planet, he couldn't restrict them from teleporting away using the circles this group clearly had access to.

This also led Jake to the second reason why he had been extremely suspicious of everything that was happening with this group. What they were doing didn't make any sense whatsoever, and the reactions of the two World Leaders confirmed it. They expected a fight to happen. For Jake to move to kill them.

All despite knowing they didn't stand a chance. Ell'Hakan certainly also knew this. So, if they knew they couldn't win, time wasn't on their side, and they had easy access to teleporters to take them all off the planet – or the rings of the World Leaders if they worked like Jake's – why the hell hadn't they just left?

The answer was simple enough. They were here to potentially sacrifice themselves and have Jake kill them in a fight. Why Ell'Hakan wanted such a recording despite his recent attempts to act as if he wanted to buddy-buddy with Jake, he didn't know, but he clearly did.

Jake was pretty confident in his theory, and while he still didn't really care how Ell'Hakan wanted to paint him, he didn't see any reason to play into the other Chosen's hand either when he had the choice not to. Besides... the two World Leaders and their entire armies were below his level, so it wasn't like killing them would even give him any experience.

"You are putting me in a very difficult position, my Lord," the elf said, looking very troubled. "We were tasked by the Celestial Child himself to defeat this Prima Guardian. To simply have another do it would be very dishonorable, especially when we have come here doing the bidding of the Chosen of such a prominent god."

The tone of the elf had shifted a bit, and while he certainly remained polite, it was clear he tried to bait a reaction of some kind out of Jake. The elf's words insinuated that the god they were carrying out the bidding of was superior to Jake's, and thus, he should back off. Any Chosen would naturally find such a notion incredibly insulting... but Jake wasn't just a Chosen.

"I'm sure the two of them will be satisfied as long as the Guardian is slain and lives are saved," Jake kept smiling. "Once more, please pull back. Clan Leader, please head to the Prima Vessel and release the Guardian. Slight warning: once released, it may chase you, so be ready and hurry out as fast as possible. I'll handle things from there."

Jake gave a look to the scalekin that left no room for arguments, and for the first time, the World Leader seemed to not be a dum-dum as he nodded and answered before the elf could intervene again. "Thank you for your warning. We cannot even begin to express our gratitude for your assistance."

With that, he flew toward the Vessel. The elf looked like he wanted to say something, and the beastkin looked ready to block the scalekin's path, but none of them ultimately did anything. Instead, they seemed to consider their options for a moment before the elf nodded and sighed.

"Very well, we'll pull back."

His surrender surprised Jake as he was fully expecting them to keep pressing, but instead, they all did indeed begin to retreat right as the scalekin entered the Vessel. Jake looked after the retreating figures and noticed that all the people recording were still going strong, and the elf and beastkin didn't look that upset... no, they looked downright relieved.

Weren't they afraid that their dear Celestial Child would be disappointed in them, or did they have some extra backup objective? Wait a second... Jake was just about to fight a Prima Guardian alone, with a few thousand live observers affiliated with Ell'Hakan and people recording...

Should definitely have seen that coming. They want to record my battle with the Guardian to gather intel on me... maybe they even want the recording for something else, too?

Jake wasn't sure... but what he was sure of was that the recording he was going to give them wouldn't be the most useful one.

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Chapter 962: Putting On A Show

Jake had many ways to approach the fight with a Prima Guardian. Usually, he just killed the creature quickly with everything he had, with the majority of those he had killed so far unable to survive even a single fully powered blow.

Out of everyone in the ninety-third universe, Jake legitimately believed he was the one with the most powerful opening attack. For his level, that is. He was also fully aware of how intimidating it was to see a boss you had made preparations for or had even battled and lost to meet its end from a single arrow.

The question was if this approach would be the smartest in this situation. It would reveal quite a lot of what Jake was capable of, and he also had to consider that it wasn't like Ell'Hakan had to ever make any of these recordings public. He could keep them for

personal study, use them for blackmail if he thought that would work for some reason, or even just destroy them if he felt like the recording only made Jake come off looking good – which him showing off his ability to one-shot a Guardian would surely do.

However, Jake saw another possibility. A chance, if you will, to do something that would be fun, confusing, and perhaps even a bit helpful in the future. Mostly fun, though.

He had wanted to mix up these Prima Guardian battles for a while, and this time around, he wasn't in any particular kind of rush, so he decided to put on a show for the audience. A show that wouldn't actually show off that much, but what he did display, he believed would prove both puzzling and useful to Ell'Hakan. Though likely not in the way the other Chosen had hoped.

First of all, Jake wouldn't use a bow. That would just make it way too easy, and he would show off his growth with his primary weapon, which he saw no reason to do. Secondly, no Malefic Viper skills. This was for his plan of potentially making the recording useful in an unexpected way. Third, he would fight it using a style he hadn't explored in a long time. One he had deployed the last time he was to face a stream of weak enemies to keep himself entertained.

That's right... it was the return of the man, the myth, the legend: Doomfoot.

Alright, Jake would also use his katars, definitely some other stuff, but he would still be doing a lot of kicking here and there! Granted, things did depend a lot on the power of the Prima Guardian, but if it was at the level he expected it to be, this very basic plan of his should work. No matter what, he couldn't forget the most important aspect of this entire show he was about to put on:

To have fun.

Jake waited patiently as all the followers of Ell'Hakan, along with the two World Leaders, retreated, leaving the magic circle and temporary structures behind spread all around the Prima Vessel. The wife of the scalekin was also with them and seemed way too chummy, but oh well.

Soon enough, everyone had retreated and now just stood back and watched. The scalekin was to purposefully not release the Guardian immediately, primarily to give Jake time to prepare, but now none of that was necessary.

The observers also looked perplexed when Jake just stood there, only a hundred meters from the entrance to the Prima Vessel. He had his arms crossed, waiting patiently while seemingly not preparing anything. It took about two minutes before a figure flew out of the Vessel. It was the scalekin, and he looked like he had blocked a few blows but was otherwise unharmed.

A second after he appeared, hot on his heels, a very humanoid Prima Guardian appeared. It looked like a mix of many different kinds of beastkin and scalekin, with a few pure monster features mixed in, though it was hard to tell.

Jake took a few steps forward while activating Arcane Awakening in its balanced state, getting a running start before he stomped down hard, teleporting and appearing in between the scalekin and Prima. The observers had likely expected to see many things during this battle... but Jake would bet none of them had dropkicking the Guardian in the face on their bingo cards.

His feet made solid contact with the monster that tried to bite down on his boots at the very last second but only ended up doing more damage to itself in the process. His dropkick sent the Guardian shooting back, smashing into the Prima Vessel with a large thunk, Jake using Identify on the boss while it was still mid-air.

[Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 301]

Truly, it wasn't worthy of his bow. Jake didn't let up his assault either as he charged forward, the Prima Guardian roaring loudly as it met his charge. Dodging its first swipe, Eternal Hunger appeared in his hand as he stabbed the creature two times before large fangs sprung from its hand and swept down.

Pivoting around it, Jake kicked the Prima in the side, sending it stumbling as a follow-up kick hit it in the head in a nice one-two combo. Throughout, Jake couldn't help but smile a bit as he felt the impact left by his kicks. He didn't really do any impressive damage, but it did something.

Angry, the Prima Guardian tried to catch Jake, but he was an elusive specter and danced around its attacks while landing counters. These Primas varied widely in quality even when they shared the same name, and this one certainly wasn't anything impressive... not that he could say any of the others he had killed recently were.

From the reactions he saw from the audience, they still looked plenty impressed, though. Keeping up his aggressiveness, Jake continued damaging the Prima Guardian with his barrage of kicks and stabs, the fight looking incredibly one-sided as Jake willingly proved his skills as a melee combatant. He showed off how the Prima Guardian seemingly couldn't land a single blow on him, no matter how hard it tried. The two of them flew across the entire area, having an extremely intense battle, tearing up the surroundings in the process and really making a spectacle of it all.

This was just the first part of Jake's plan, though. He was waiting for something to happen... and as expected, it did when he had done enough damage. The Prima Guardian slowly began to change. It got thinner, more lithe, grew longer legs, and overall its speed increased to new levels. In return, it lost some of its raw power, but, really, did any level of raw power truly matter if it couldn't land any blows?

With its newfound speed, the Guardian went on the offensive for the first time in a while. Jake was seemingly pushed back and could only focus on dodging while barely landing any counterattacks. Finally, he saw a good chance as the Prima attacked from above, and Jake decided to block as he was launched downward toward the ground.

He slowed his descent and landed, the Prima Guardian floating above as it seemed to be gathering mana for some kind of magical attack. Jake was more than happy to see the Guardian be so cooperative, as it gave him plenty of time to act in front of his audience.

Jake made a show of glancing about before going and picking up a metal pole that was about three meters long that had been left by a tent that broke during their fight. Such a pole wouldn't really be useful for anything under regular circumstances... but Jake had a way to make it into a valid weapon.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Purposefully speaking in a low and unassuming tone – that he was certain would still be picked up by the recorders – Jake activated the skill as he claimed the weapon as a tool of humanity.

“Fangs of Man.”

As he spoke, Jake infused energy into the pole as it became one with him, strengthening it significantly in the process and, for a brief moment, made it give off a very faint golden luster that faded as quickly as it had come... but it had been there.

This was the most important aspect of what Jake was doing. The secret option of what the recording could become. Fangs of Man was not usually a skill that had any real visual indicator, and even if Valdemar seemingly could detect some trace of it during their encounter, he hadn't been entirely sure. Now, Jake wouldn't leave anything up to doubt.

He could already imagine it. The murmurs spawned from the Chosen of the Malefic Viper battling a Prima Guardian like a battle maniac in a brawl, not using any skills related to his Patron but those of another Primordial.

Jake wasn't afraid of Ell'Hakan not knowing what he was seeing either. Jake knew that while Fangs of Man was far from a normal skill, the energy he had given off while using it had the all-too-familiar glow of a skill related to Valdemar. Even if Ell'Hakan wasn't certain what he was looking at, Yip of Yore would surely know once he was shown.

The two of them wanted a world where Jake bailed on the Malefic Viper and potentially joined Valhal, right? He would more than gladly play into that fantasy to mess with the two of them. The only thing he felt a bit bad about was potentially fooling Valdemar into thinking Jake had a genuine interest in joining his glorified fight club, but if the god felt

too sad or disappointed about it, he was sure they could settle any bad feelings over a beer.

It was clear none of the observers put any significance in what Jake had done, which was just what he wanted. He didn't want people to think this was staged and something Jake purposefully wanted others to see. Instead, he wanted it to look like a battle junkie, not really thinking as he was engrossed in the heat of battle, experimenting and going wild.

A role he would gladly continue to enjoy playing, as the Prima Guardian released a massive bolt of pure mana that split apart in mid-air into over a hundred crystalized homing bolts. Focusing, Jake shot upwards, dodging many of the bolts while using his new metal pole weapon to smash away a few others.

The Prima Guardian wasn't idle either but charged down to meet him while using its swarm of crystalized mana bolts. They reminded Jake of a shitty version of his own stable arcane mana, and he easily broke them apart one after another.

They did add a bit of pressure as Jake and the Guardian clashed, but not enough for Jake to bother increasing the output of his boosting skill. The moment they met, Jake swung the metal pole hard, the Prima Guardian seemingly not even seeing it as a threat. This proved to be a big mistake, as the hand it tried to swipe the pole away with had a finger broken while not even slowing down Jake's swing and earning itself a metal pipe to the head.

Using the pole as a weapon, Jake kept up his assault, swinging recklessly. The weapon very quickly began deteriorating, as despite the effects of Fang of Man, it was still just a regular metal pole. Luckily for him, he had plenty of replacement weapons in the rubble below.

Before the pole even fully broke, Jake held out an open hand as he used telekinesis to yolk a shorter metal pole from below. The second he caught it, he once more actively showed off his use of Fangs of Man, and just in time before his first pole snapped in two.

Jake decided to heighten the tempo as he upped his boosting skill and used its offensive mode, increasing certain stats by another 20%. His increased speed and power took the Guardian by surprise as it was struck three times in a row with Jake's metal pipe, and from below, more improvised weapons floated up.

Fangs of Man was the kind of skill Jake never actively used or considered much. It was just there in the background, functioning as Jake's weapon skill. It could most easily be compared as the melee counterpart to his archery skill. It wasn't rooted in any particular fighting style or weapon, though, but the nature of humanity and their ability to use or transform nearly anything into a weapon should the need arise. It made him innately

understand how to use any melee weapon he picked up, with Jake knowing this stemmed from tapping into the ancient Records of humanity.

The skill even partly worked when he used his bow, except pretty much all the bonuses were overwritten by his actual archery skill, as the stat effectiveness bonus and whatnot didn't stack. One could only have one such effect at a time, after all.

Either way, Fangs of Man was a powerful skill, and while Jake wouldn't say he had neglected it, he had most definitely never properly utilized it. It was just really hard to justify testing the skill out and using it in a fashion like this. Finding an opponent strong enough to put up a good prolonged fight to really get into it was hard, and things were only made harder when Jake felt pressure to kill his opponent fast.

However, against this Prima Guardian, he had a very durable opponent that was strong enough to make the fight a little hard, and no time constraints he cared about. Needless to say, swinging random improvised weapons was far less effective than using his katars, but Jake had fun with it as he also explored the Fangs of Man skill a bit more and put on a good show for the audience. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON
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Sadly, all good things must come to an end. Jake's relentless barrage of attacks had left the Prima Guardian beaten and battered, both its arms broken in several places, with nearly a dozen metal poles sticking out of its back, with an entire leg missing.

Jake went in for the killing combo, as he used Eternal Hunger for the first time in a while but not to kill the Prima. Instead, he dodged one of its desperate blows before cutting off the clawed hand, and while twisting his body, caught the hand and used it as a weapon as he stabbed its own claws into the neck of the Guardian.

Finally, he pulled up one of the remaining metal poles from below, a particularly large one that had been used in one of the bigger tents, the thing nearly four meters long. Jake focused the second he had it in his hand as he recalled the battle he had seen using Path of the Heretic-Chosen. He remembered how Valdemar had caught the broken fang of the Malefic Viper and transformed it into an axe.

That wasn't something he could do, but with enough focus, he could alter his improvised weapon slightly. A golden luster enveloped the metal pole, more intense toward its tip as it slightly swarped. It sharpened, taking on the shape of a simple spear as Jake smiled.

The still-reeling Prima Guardian couldn't defend itself properly as Jake stabbed forward, hitting the Prima once in the chest. It roared as Jake predicted, and he took advantage as he used a quick regular Gaze to freeze its body with its mouth open. He pulled back the spear and promptly stabbed the Guardian through its open mouth, the metal pole penetrating through and exiting out the top of its skull. The tip entirely broke during this, but it was good enough.

With a good wrench, Jake shattered the skull of the Guardian even more, not stopping as he flew around the creature and twisted its neck one-eighty degrees before finally twisting the pole to an upward angle, fully breaking the neck of the Guardian and stabbing the improvised spear into the back of the Guardian.

In truth, the Prima had already been a goner the second he had stabbed it through its open mouth, with the rest just a show of violence to fully end its existence. Jake did one last swing as he lifted up and tossed the Prima down onto the ground with the improvised spear and many other weapons still sticking out of its body, the boss dead before it even hit the ground.

You have slain [Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 301]– Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Jake, floating in the air while covered in blood from head to toe, cracked his neck as he looked toward the many observers, the scalekin World Leader among them. They got the message as a few flew over, the two World Leaders affiliated with Ell'Hakan naturally among them.

Their facial expressions weren't hard to read. If they had been afraid before, they were absolutely terrified now. He did also see traces of confusion. Chances are they had been told what kind of fighter Jake was, which hadn't at all fit what they had just witnessed.

"That was decently fun. Sadly, the Guardian was disappointingly weak," Jake spoke casually with a smile beneath his mask as they approached.

He was very much looking forward to the reaction Ell'Hakan would have seeing the recording, but more than that, he was interested in Yip of Yore's reaction. Jake wasn't sure exactly how they would interpret it, but if nothing else, Jake had at least created a bit of chaos and confusion with his performance.

However, not even he could have predicted what kind of effects this strategy, which was in large part just a glorified excuse to experiment and have some fun, would end up having.

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Chapter 963: A Very Interesting Recording

Skipping forward a bit in time, to a few days after Jake had slain the Prima Guardian and the recording had found its final destination, two gods were discussing its contents.

"What are your thoughts?" the first god asked the man standing not far from him within the vast library that made up his divine realm. Both of them had just watched the very interesting recording. Very interesting indeed...

"It was so obviously staged it's almost comical," the other god responded, an eternal smile hanging on his face. "Knowing his Bloodline and abilities, he was clearly aware the recording was taking place."

"Yet he chose to do nothing about it but offer us this show..."

Yip of Yore and Eversmile had met to discuss the recording of Jake slaying the Prima Guardian in quite an unusual fashion as they tried to make sense of his actions. Yip did have some understanding of the Chosen, but Eversmile far surpassed him in that area. Plus, the god of karma clearly had some personal interest in the human, so he was more than happy to provide his opinion. As for how they had even gotten the recording in the first place?

While it was true the ninety-third universe was cut off from the rest of the multiverse during this system event, that didn't mean it was impossible to get around these limitations. Ell'Hakan could not contact Yip of Yore directly, but the ability to provide offerings through a skill of his wasn't cut off.

Usually, a god would have two choices when receiving an offering. One would be to turn the offering into energy of some form, which tended to be the default choice, as it was very rare mortals had any items a god actually needed as-is. More often than not, the item was one that held significance only due to its Records. A good example of this was how the warriors from Valhal often offered parts of their slain enemies to their gods. The items themselves had little value, but the Records by which they were attained through battle did.

The second option was naturally to receive the actual item, something that could also only be done when the one giving the offering had a good enough skill and high enough level of Blessing. Needless to say, Ell'Hakan fulfilled both of these requirements.

Speaking of Ell'Hakan... it was a shame he could not get contacted to hear his thoughts on the matter, but oh well. Yip of Yore didn't know how much his input would offer in the first place, as he naturally couldn't use his Bloodline on a recording like this.

"We know that this recording was purposefully created for yours and Ell'Hakan's eyes, and as you say, the question that remains now is why," Eversmile spoke. "You are aware of the skill he so blatantly showed off?"

"Fangs of Man," Yip nodded. "Seen and experienced myself. I reckon you also concur on its authenticity?"

"Yes, that is undoubtedly a skill belonging to Valdemar's Legacy," Eversmile confirmed. "And I'm sure you also noted how he didn't use a single skill related to the Malefic Viper's Legacy. He didn't even use any poison during the battle."

"I sure did," Yip smiled. "It's all so odd. If I saw this without context, I could easily have been led to believe that this was some fighter from Valhal showing off their skills. Or, more accurately, showing off one of their skills. Also, as far as I'm aware, Fangs of Man is not exactly a typical skill."

Eversmile looked to be in thought for a moment before he spoke. "Fangs of Man is as much a skill tied to the Records of humanity as it's tied directly to Valdemar. He is just the progenitor of it. One of the basic requirements of the skill is to embrace your Path as a human and acknowledge human supremacy, something that usually comes more naturally to members of Valhal due to it being predominately human. One has to truly view the human race as the strongest in the multiverse – or at least the one with the most potential. Many of Valhal are never even qualified to learn this skill simply due to unconscious doubt about themselves or their race. Yet clearly, the hunter sees humans as a race belonging to the apex of the multiverse. As you said, quite odd for the Chosen of a beast to have such thoughts, especially if we assume he knows the history between Valdemar and Vilastromoz."

"Almost a bit heretical, huh? Tell me it isn't just me... but do you also believe the Chosen of the Malefic Viper is walking down the Path of a heretic?" Yip of Yore asked probingly, carefully considering all of Eversmile's words. While the god of karma rarely, if ever, lied, he was good at concealing truths by only revealing parts of what was real, using wordplay or hidden meanings, or any other method to fool the other party without technically lying. Getting a straight answer to a question of any importance was almost impossible, but-

"Yes," Eversmile answered, short and sweet, his next words only hammering it home. "I do believe Jake Thayne is a heretic or at least will be labeled one by the system soon enough. Saying that, I will readily admit I have no actual proof, only my own assessment."

Yip of Yore couldn't help but grin at Eversmile's statement. "Your assessment is good enough. Assuming he is indeed well on his way to becoming an actual heretic... do you think the Malefic Viper knows?"

"That, I cannot know for certain," Eversmile shook his head. "Now it's my turn to ask you something. Do you intend to offer Jake Thayne the opportunity to become a Divine Usurper of the Malefic Viper's Path?"

"I'm not, *not* considering putting it on the table," Yip answered after a bit of consideration. "I fully acknowledge that Jake Thayne is the peak of this era, perhaps even the peak of history. While there have certainly been those who can match his power, he is not simply a fighter capable of standing at the pinnacle but the Harbinger of Primeval Origins. An identity so meaningful the system bestowed such a title upon him, letting everyone know. He is a rare breed indeed."

"But?" Eversmile asked with a raised eyebrow.

"That doesn't mean he cannot be killed. Only if it's necessary, of course. But I will not take the option of ending his life away should he prove someone that cannot be negotiated with. If he chooses to remain at the side of the Malefic Viper, he will die, and as the slayer of a Primordial, do I truly have to fear the animosity such an act would breed? The Malefic Viper has done considerably far greater damage to the multiverse than killing some Harbinger of Primeval Origins ever could. I would perhaps even make a few allies should I succeed," Yip of Yore answered.

"You have yet to truly answer my question," Eversmile pointed out.

"I was getting to it," Yip smiled, relaxed. "My point is that I'm not sure it's even possible to put such an option on the table in the first place. Someone like Jake Thayne is bound to be stubborn and, from my understanding of him, a bit simple. This entire recording is proof of that, and seeing as how obvious it is he clearly isn't the most subtle either. Someone like him doesn't strike me as the sort who would be open to being told to do something or feel forced into a particular Path. My ideal outcome is indeed that he becomes the Divine Usurper of the Malefic Viper, and I slay the Primordial, but if I or my Chosen are the ones who suggest that do him, he's only going to be more opposed to the option. No, the only way I see to get him on board is to either make him think it's his own idea, or by having someone he actually seems to respect recommend it."

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"Getting Valdemar to propose such a thing won't be easy," Eversmile answered, shaking his head. "I would also point out that it's not even necessary you have to present the option to him. There is a chance that is already what he's planning, especially if we look at this recording, which feels almost like an application to join Valhal. In my opinion, you should find a method of letting him know about his options, though, in case it wasn't on his radar."

"I will," Yip nodded. "Based on how he didn't even kill the mortal fodder who serve my Chosen, it appears he can at least be communicated with."

"And if, in the end, he still continues to see you and your Chosen as mortal enemies?" Eversmile questioned.

"Then he'll die," Yip of Yore said casually.

The god who would be a Primordial Slayer looked at the recording playing on repeat once more but didn't see anything new worth noting. By now, many of the plans Yip of Yore had put into motion had been derailed or destroyed entirely, yet he didn't feel the slightest bit upset. Jake Thayne was an incredible element of chaos in any situation he found himself mixed into, and while that certainly made things more complicated for Yip, it had to be worse for the Viper. In fact, as things were looking, this would lead to a better final outcome than initially expected.

Yip of Yore was a god of stories. Legends. Any situation could be rewritten, meanings twisted, and plans retconned. As long as the right building blocks were laid down, he could manifest the reality he desired. The Chosen of the Malefic Viper was just one element, but ultimately... nothing he ever did would have more than a marginal effect on the plan to slay the Viper. Sure, it could make it a bit harder or less annoying, but what he really impacted was what came after.

No, in the end, the true decider between Yip of Yore and the Malefic Viper would simply be who was stronger. Yip, in his most powerful form, or the Malefic Viper, a Primordial who had sealed himself away for the vast majority of the multiverse's history. Even so, a Primordial was a Primordial, and it was a massive gamble, but one Yip was willing to take if it meant overcoming his limits and reaching the next level.

Truly, if there was one thing worth regretting in this entire ordeal with Jake Thayne, it was that the Malefic Viper had gotten to such a human first. He truly was extraordinary in every sense of the word. Ah, the legends Yip and such a human could have written together. Alas, Yip shouldn't be too disappointed. While Jake Thayne had shown little of his true power during the fight with the Prima Guardian, he couldn't hide his true strength from the god's eyes... and Yip wouldn't say his own Chosen was that far off, if at all. Especially if the conditions were right. In such a case, their fight could truly be legendary.

Because no matter what, there would be a fight. Two geniuses of a generation like that were bound to clash, no matter the circumstances. The only difference was if it would be a fight to the death between mortal enemies or a spar to decide who is better between allies or perhaps even friends.

--

Jake had never wanted to just get the fuck off a world that badly before. After he'd killed the Prima Guardian and "saved" everyone, he instantly noticed how half the people recording quickly teleported away, likely to preserve at least some of the recordings should Jake now choose to turn on them. The remaining half stayed filming the aftermath.

An aftermath that was really annoying. The scalekin quickly stormed forward to profusely thank Jake while the two World Leaders related to Ell'Hakan remained as

vigilant as ever. Jake didn't do anything to them, though. Quite frankly, he just wanted out of there... but while the scalekin was an idiot, he wasn't *that* dumb.

The scalekin knew that the moment Jake left, he would be surrounded by potential enemies on all sides. With the Prima Guardian dead, they had even less reason to keep him around, at least from his perspective. So, the guy desperately wanted to convince Jake to remain a bit longer at least, and with the ongoing recording, Jake felt like he couldn't just outright bail.

That's how he ended up going to claim the Planetary Pylon with the scalekin, returned topside once more, and somehow ended up part of a big clan meet with all the different clans on the planet gathering for final peace talks.

The two World Leaders also stayed around, with a few people recording always nearby. Seriously, Ell'Hakan had to have invested some serious resources in hiring this many camera operators, but oh well. Jake just went along with things as a new grand declaration was signed, the scalekin swearing to create a council that would lead the planet with him only having a single seat on it. To make it clear, Jake gave this entire alliance about a month tops before it collapsed based on how the majority of clan leaders stared at each other with pure hatred.

All this shit that would more likely than not turn out to have been a complete waste of time within a month took a few days to do after returning from the Prima Vessel and claiming the Pylon, and Jake really only stayed around to keep up appearances. Alas, there was only so much he could take.

When Jake was asked to be the officiant for the scalekin and his wife renewing their wedding vows – because some-fucking-how that trainwreck seemed salvageable to them - Jake knew it was time to run, using any excuse he could come up with to get away. The latest_epr_sodes are on_the **novel** ♦fire♦*net*

Only once Jake was back on Earth could he breathe out a sigh of relief. He returned to the Prima Vessel once more and coincidentally bumped into Lillian, who had been standing there looking at the map.

"Ah, Lord Thayne, you've returned," she said politely, throwing him a look. "How did things go? You were gone a bit longer than usual."

Jake didn't immediately answer but pointed to the planet he had just been to, which was, of course, now green on the map. "Make sure Miranda knows to not accept anyone from that planet. Ever."

Lillian instantly got a serious look as she looked at the planet Jake pointed at. "What's wrong with it? Is it controlled by Ell'Hakan's alliance?"

"... probably?" Jake said, honestly not entirely sure. Chances are they were based on how at least three-fourths of the planet seemed to support the two World Leaders sent by Ell'Hakan. And, no, Jake did not want to try and force them over to "his" side because that would have required him to stay there. That wasn't why Jake wanted to blacklist them, though... he just really didn't ever want to see about or hear about any of them ever again. Of course, such a reason was a bit petty, and Lillian did have a good point, so:

"Actually, yeah, they are allies of Ell'Hakan, and we should avoid anyone from that planet ever getting here to prevent spies," Jake said with a stoic nod.

Lillian threw him a glance before sighing. "You really didn't like the natives there?"

"They were really annoying, okay?" Jake sighed loudly. "Also probably, definitely, now allies of Ell'Hakan. Which, in my book, is a pure win for us. Because going by how goddamn dysfunctional everything there was, I see no world where they contribute anything positive to any alliance."

"It sounds best you tell Miranda about what happened if the other Chosen was involved in this matter," Lillian reminded Jake.

"I should, yeah," Jake nodded in agreement. Only now did he also look at the map and saw what Lillian had been staring at when he arrived, and...

"A second one?" he blurted out with wide eyes.

"Yeah, it happened only two hours ago," Lillian shook her head. "We confirmed it was marked with a blue flag before."

Jake stared at the map where he now saw not one but two planets marked with a black flag. A second world had faced destruction, and Jake couldn't see any other explanation than that "I" creature. He hoped he was wrong, though, and it was just some freak coincidence... but his guts told him it wasn't, which indicated only one thing:

This creature had now found a method to destroy planetary cores somewhat fast and consistently... and it was actively traveling around doing so.

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Chapter 964: Keeping Up the Good Fight

Jake and Miranda met up inside the Prima Vessel as they both looked at the map that had more and more green flags by the day but also more grey ones as quite a few of the planets who had tried to face the Prima Guardian event alone fell to the attack. This was an expected outcome, as nobody had expected every planet to get out unscathed.

The appearance of the black flags was not expected, though. However, they had held on hope when they saw only one of them that it was some kind of anomaly. Jake had even theorized that maybe the creature had given its own life to somehow destroy the core or done something it could only do once. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY **novel~fire~net**

Now, it was clear this wasn't a one-off. What's more, the creature known as "I" had figured out how to destroy a core far faster than before. This also fully eliminated any possibility of it consuming these cores in any way, as there was no way in hell it had enough time to digest a Planetary Core this quickly. It was purposefully destroying them, dooming entire worlds.

One huge question still bothered them, though.

"Why is it doing this?" Miranda thought out loud. "I checked the notes we had on the targeted planet, and it wasn't just some random place. It was part of Ell'Hakan's alliance, so unless this is some extreme plan to make us think they are unrelated to one another, I can't see a world where this creature and Ell'Hakan are allies. This makes me think this targeting is indiscriminatory and random."

"It likely is," Jake muttered. "This creature appeared out of nowhere. It didn't hesitate to end its own planet and now moved on to do the same thing with a second one. I believe it's just following its Path. There is no logic or reasoning behind the action besides just doing what it's born to do."

"So it's a living calamity of some kind," Miranda sighed, less than amused by the notion.

Jake slowly nodded, thinking that was entirely possible. Creatures like that could just be born anywhere randomly but tended to be in areas with powerful Records... and the Milky Way Galaxy was already a maelstrom of Records at this point. The unexpected was almost to be expected with their circumstances.

"Any idea what kind of creature it could be? Doesn't seem to fit the description of a Plague Spirit or anything curse-based. It's also clearly intelligent if it can teleport to other planets using the Prima Vessel or other system-provided magic circles... do you think it might be enlightened, seeing as it was the World Leader?" Miranda asked curiously, though Jake knew she was as much surmising out loud as she was actually asking.

"We simply don't have enough information yet," Jake shook his head. "There is one more thing, though... why would anyone accept the creature's request to teleport to their planet if they see it applying from a planet marked with a black flag?"

"A better question would be if its request even needs to be accepted anymore or if it can force its way in," Miranda said in a grave voice. "Either way, we should stay alert in case it somehow ends up going to Earth while hoping it chooses to focus on Ell'Hakan's alliance. If we get lucky, perhaps your rival Chosen deals with it."

"Not sure I count him as my rival," Jake muttered. "Who knows, maybe this creature ends up killing Ell'Hakan? That would sure be a plot twist of the ages."

"A rather anti-climactic one after all the buildup of his story," Miranda commented in a deadpan tone.

"Would be kind of funny, though," Jake joked, fully aware it wasn't going to happen. Ell'Hakan was definitely the careful sort, and he wouldn't risk fighting an unknown entity like that without any information. He was way more likely to throw a few planets at "I" to learn what he was dealing with before stepping up himself.

It was far more likely that should Ell'Hakan conclude this "I" wasn't something he could handle himself, he would try to find a way to make it fight Jake and potentially even kill Jake. Not only would that allow Ell'Hakan to get rid of Jake, but it would also minimize the backlash from having done so. Yeah, that was definitely something that orange fuck would gladly do.

What had happened on that scalekin World Leader's planet was proof of how underhanded the other Chosen could be when he wanted, as Ell'Hakan had clearly been willing to sacrifice two World Leaders and every single person he had sent there just to get a recording of Jake. Speaking of that entire thing... Miranda hadn't made any negative comments about Jake's conduct, even when he explained what he'd done. In fact, quite the opposite. In her words:

"You were put in a situation with no good options. If you killed the World Leaders, you wouldn't just have to slay them but many of their supporters, all of your actions getting recorded. Such a recording could quickly spread to the rest of the galaxy, and it would make our job much harder, even with Kindroth helping out. On the other hand, backing down entirely and letting them handle the Prima Guardian would make you appear incredibly meek and weak. Ultimately, I do agree your approach of killing the Prima Guardian while seemingly not being that interested in the two World Leaders was the best. It made you appear as nothing but a professional hunter just going around killing Guardians and not much else. As for that entire thing with your Fangs of Man skill... no comment. That is, in all honesty, far above my paygrade and something you'll have to talk to the Malefic Viper about directly once that's possible. No way I wanna risk saying the wrong thing, potentially pissing off a Primordial or two."

So, yeah, Jake was pretty proud of himself for that one, and he had honestly expected a bit of scolding once he was back. Not to say Jake thought he had done things perfectly, but he hadn't messed up enough for Miranda to make a big deal out of it. He just hoped that the moment he reestablished his connection with the Malefic Viper, the god

wouldn't instantly tell him he was a bloody moron while making fun of him for how much he sucked at scheming.

Returning his attention to the present situation in front of the star map, Miranda turned to Jake. "What's your next target planet? Anything particular in mind?"

"I'm undecided," Jake said, shaking his head. "How about all the others? Are they keeping busy?"

"The Sword Saint had some things he had to deal with here on Earth and took a few day's break. Sylphie, the Fallen King, and the True Royal are taking quite a while with each planet due to their unique circumstances and lack of proper enlightened infrastructure. From what I heard, these planets also aren't very stable and they were helping a bit there. Your brother and Maria haven't been back here since the last time we spoke, and Casper is still working on the... I don't wanna call it a reservation, but as things are right now, that is effectively what it is," Miranda answered.

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The "reservation" she was talking about was the permanent presence the Risen wanted to establish back on Earth, and the solution they had landed on was to give them their own pretty large area to rule independently while naturally still being under the umbrella of Earth's council and Jake.

As Miranda said, it did feel a bit weird to call it a reservation, but she also wasn't wrong in that it was pretty accurate. The Risen had been given an island quite a good distance into the ocean, with extremely deep water all around it, which would serve as a natural barrier for all the miasma and death energy a land ruled by the Risen would release.

Water, in general, tended to be great at absorbing other affinities and mixing with it – hence its use in all forms of alchemy. This would attune the waters around the island to the death affinity, but they didn't fear it spreading out into the wider ocean. While they would release a lot of death affinity energy into the water, a far greater constant infusion of life energy would limit its spread.

As for where all this life energy would come from? The big ball of life and flames hanging in the center of their little solar system, shining down its rays upon their planet and infusing it with life every day. As long as the Risen didn't put up barriers also covering the water, the powers of the sun were more than enough to keep death at bay.

On a small side note, Casper informed Jake that death-affinity stars existed elsewhere in the universe. There were entire galaxies that only had stars like these, turning them into domains where the dead tended to live in great numbers. Countless undead monsters could appear, especially in the unique galaxies that happened to have both death and life stars at the same time, leading to a balance of constantly giving birth to

powerful like that in death tuned into powerful undead. It was definitely the kind of galaxy Jake would one day want to visit for recreational and leveling purposes.

Either way, it was good to hear the Risen were settling in. He just hoped the rest of the population wasn't being too dickish about it.

"Have there been any issues due to their presence yet? Lots of complainers?" Jake asked, knowing that the Risen was still a very unpopular race.

"A few dozen protests, false alarms that the Risen kidnap people to turn them into zombies, conspiracy theories and fake news everywhere, as well with a few nearly-violent encounters with Risen just minding their own business. Not really any problem from the Risen side, though. Casper and Priscilla have been good at controlling the ones they sent and making sure to properly vet and inform them of issues they could face returning here, so they are handling it like champs," Miranda said with a sigh. "And before you ask, I have considered several times taking off a few weeks to go kill a Prima Guardian or two with a few others for a damn holiday, but I fear that by the time I come back, everything will have gone to shit."

"Look on the bright side, this has to give a lot of experience," Jake grinned.

"I'm in no way concerned my profession won't reach peak C-grade first. It's class levels I really need, and I'm not sure trying to get more class levels through this conflict will help calm things down," she sighed.

"You could always rain down frogs on the protestors. That ought to make them stop and think," Jake shrugged.

"What makes you think I even know how to make a frog rain? Learning to do something like that is in no way simple, and actually using such a skill isn't practical in the slightest and pretty much useless," Miranda asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Are you saying you don't know how to make a frog rain?" Jake asked, seriously questioning if Miranda was even a real witch.

"... I hate that I do know how," Miranda sighed. "My Patrons insisted it was a vital ability to learn despite it having no use-case. Would you believe me if I said they even want me to learn how to make the frogs yell insults at people?"

"What good frog rain doesn't also include a rain of insults," Jake said as if it was obvious.

Miranda just stared at him for a moment before gladly changing the subject entirely as if the prior conversation had never happened. "Of those who left Earth, I have yet to hear anything from the members of the Holy Church. Not that I necessarily expected them to come back and visit, but their silence is a bit surprising."

"We already know they work with Ell'Hakan or at least have some kind of agreement," Jake shrugged, allowing Miranda to change the subject before she decided to throw frogs at him. "Speaking of their allies... heard anything from Carmen recently?"

"Nothing since the message that Valhal put together a team to roam the galaxy to kill Prima Guardians," Miranda said with a shrug. "I did hear from third parties that they aren't only killing Guardians on the planets under the thumb of Ell'Hakan, though. Even went to two Kindroth had been in contact with and we had to remove them from the list due to that."

"Great, more competition," Jake sighed, not actually that upset. "Is Arnold and-"

"I'm sure they'll let you know first thing once everything's ready," Miranda cut him off, knowing full well what he was about to ask, considering Jake had asked the same question more than a dozen times already over the last couple of months.

"Alright, alright," Jake muttered, a bit down. If only he could teleport to the red planets that weren't part of the system-made Prima Guardian Alliance, he would have so many more bosses to kill. More than that, he would be able to speed up the end of this entire system event. Alas, he would have to wait a bit longer. Not too long, hopefully.

Jake considered if he wanted to go and visit Haven or something like that, but ultimately landed on just keeping up the good fight. There were still so many planets on the list created with the help of Kindroth, even if he and the Sword Saint were pretty damn efficient. Once Caleb and others were done handling their own matters, they would likely also come help. If not them, then Sylphie, Vesperia, and the Fallen King shouldn't be that much longer dealing with all the planets with an Endless Empire presence.

Going over the list of planets, Jake quickly found the ones that looked the least complicated to handle, as he really wasn't in for any more complications. He especially wasn't keen on finding himself in another situation where he felt like an unwilling marriage counselor who just sat in the corner listening to the couple fight before randomly making up and making out.

Luckily, the next few Prima Guardian kills happened quite uneventfully. The planets he visited were relatively stable. If you ignored the fact they were dealing with a potentially planet-destroying invasion of powerful monsters, that is.

The point is there was no huge drama or involvement from other large factions, just extremely grateful World Leaders and military personnel. Sure, there were a few minor incidents where arrogant "heroes" who were still scared shitless of the Prima Guardian tried to play tough and cause trouble, but a good staredown tended to be good enough to handle most of those.

Jake also made sure to mark down another important number. He had a bet going with the Sword Saint, who would get the most marriage proposals or just proposed

concubines thrown at them during this entire event. So far, Jake was at eleven, with eight women and three men... which was still behind the fifteen the Sword Saint had the last time Jake checked in with the guy. This was despite Jake killing more Guardians, thus also getting more opportunities.

Both of them were losing hard to Miranda, though. Most factions didn't dare try to make such propositions to people like Jake or the Sword Saint, but Miranda, the political figurehead in all this, seemed a lot more approachable, allowing her to now sit at more than fifty such offers. Luckily, she wasn't part of their bet.

Over the next two weeks, Jake got his number up to fourteen as he killed nine more Prima Guardians. Between every kill, he returned to Earth to quickly check in on how things were going before heading off again. After killing number eight Guardian – and thirteen days since the last one – another black flag appeared on the galaxy map.

The planet this time was one that hadn't been part of Ell'Hakan's alliance, nor one Kindroth had any particular contact with. This only gave more credibility to the theory that this targeting was random.

When Jake returned after killing nine Guardians, ready to quickly go and kill number ten, he met Lillian once more in the teleportation room, taking notes at the galaxy map.

The two of them locked eyes for a moment, and as Lillian spoke, Jake already knew as he couldn't help but grin.

"Arnold asked to see you... he said they are ready for beta testing."

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- Chapter 965: Jake the Beta Tester

Chapter 965: Jake the Beta Tester

Jake had been looking forward to this day for several months, and now it was finally here. Granted, it was only called a beta test, but Jake still chose to remain excited. He had played enough video games before the system to know that calling something a beta test was just another term for a demo and to convince people to pre-order the product.

It turns out that wasn't the kind of beta Arnold was talking about... the guy actually used the term correctly, as when Jake arrived at the teleportation circle, it clearly wasn't fully ready yet. In the room with the teleporter, Jake found Arnold on what looked like a large terminal with wires of mana connected to the teleportation circle, with William writing something on one of the walls in deep concentration and a shrunk-down Sandy chilling in the corner, seemingly asleep, contributing nothing.

"So... how are things progressing? Does the circle work now?" Jake said as he walked in, Arnold not even turning to look at him.

"We completed all the milestones of alpha-testing after a period of twenty-six days and have now entered beta-testing. The teleportation circle now successfully taps into the power inherent in the Prima Vessel, using the star map and our own relative calculations of coordinates of every target planet based on this map. This is further corrected using a scan for mana signatures correspondent with Prima Vessel teleporters to accurately estimate the final teleportation destination," Arnold briefly explained, Jake nodding along as he glanced at William.

"I noticed no mention of any karmic magic involved," Jake commented.

"That is part of the elements we are working to implement in the first phases of the beta testing," Arnold answered, with William still deeply focused on... something. "It is intended that we will be able to get a general scan of what will be found on each planet to supplement what is provided by the Prima Vessel. More accurately, a method of knowing if notable figures are there that are either best avoided... or pursued. Additionally, karmic considerations are part of the calculations, but due to my own lack of knowledge on the subject, I cannot make effective use of the karmic mage's knowledge."

Jake raised an eyebrow, as honestly, the way they wanted to use karmic magic did sound kind of neat. It also didn't escape Jake how Arnold clearly stood up for William, even raising his gaze from the terminal and giving Jake a look that told him to back off. Jake also instantly realized why.

William was part of the project.

Arnold was the project leader.

Arnold was a good boss who wouldn't allow his project members to be thrown under the bus.

Jake took the hint and changed the subject as he kept asking about the teleporter: "What is left to be ironed out before you would say the teleporter is complete?"

"The most substantive challenges right now are the power consumption and relative inaccuracy of every teleport. We are working over long distances with many concepts and factors at play that may disrupt our calculations," Arnold continued. "The more

entities are teleported, the more inaccurate it will also be. We have done a few tests already with objects or captured low-intelligence beasts with trackers on them, and the results are both encouraging and troubling.”

”How so?” Jake asked, hoping the problems weren’t too bad. Follow current novels on **novel♦fire♦net**

”Let me first clarify that the power of those we teleport only affects energy consumption and not the inaccuracy. During some of our first tests, as we honed in the accuracy of the teleporter with single-entity tests, the outlook was positive. However, the moment we tried to teleport two at once, things proved difficult,” Arnold began as he looked a bit exhausted just talking about it. ”Every subsequent entity added to the teleportation exponentially increases the energy consumption and the inaccuracy. When we teleported two, they appeared five days of Sandy’s full flight speed within subspace from the planet. Three entities were over a month’s worth of travel distance away, four over a year, and with five entities, they appeared too close to the local star to even get any proper readings, indicating a travel distance of more than twenty years if we are conservative. These are just rough estimates, but I hope this clarifies my meaning.”

”It does... how about teleporting several entities one after another instead of all at once?” Jake asked, though he probably didn’t have to as Arnold would have, of course, considered that. Which he had.

”The circle takes time to cool down after each teleport, built in as a safety mechanism. Additionally, as we weaken the immediate void membrane around the circle with every activation, we need to give it time to fully restore lest we want to risk ruining our work entirely. Plus, unless everything is stable, the inaccuracy only increases,” Arnold answered.

”Just out of curiosity, what would happen if we break this void membrane?” Jake asked curiously, as he was interested to know what an actual void user would think happened.

”We wouldn’t be able to, so it’s a moot point, but if you are speaking from a purely theoretical standpoint, we would temporarily open a hole to the void and, without the ability to stabilize this gateway, likely end up consuming most of the Milky Way Galaxy before the natural laws of the universe naturally fix the hole,” Arnold answered casually.

Jake nodded as Arnold’s answer was in line with what Jake had read. The void membrane was just another term for the wall between the universes and the void, and the only ones capable of breaking it open were people with the power of gods. The thought that gods could poke holes in reality that consumed galaxies was a bit of a scary thought, but considering the feat some gods had in history, not even anything worth noting.

”How long do you think this beta testing will last?” Jake asked, having looked forward to teleporting to other places in the galaxy. However, it seemed like he would have to wait

a bit longer. At least that's what he thought... having yet to realize he was their beta tester.

"That's why I asked for you," Arnold said, keeping his usual tone. "This beta test will not be as short as the alpha testing, and I cannot make any gaurantees we will even finish everything before the Prima Guardian system event has concluded, if ever. However, that does not mean it isn't useable. Single-entity teleportation is already stable and accurate enough that I have full confidence in its ability to teleport you or any other singular person within a short distance of any target planet in the database. The reason why I believe you are the best subject is because we have no method to return the one teleported. It is possible the teleporter within the Prima Vessel can be used, or the local population that remains can offer assistance, but your ring remains the most consistent method available to ensure the return is possible. Even if that should fail, you are the Chosen of a Primordial, and I'm certain the Malefic One would gladly assist you should you find yourself lost in space."

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In summary, Arnold believed the teleportation circle was good enough to work decently, and Jake was the only one who was a World Leader and could teleport home by himself. Oh, and should the accident be out and he couldn't, his sugar daddy Patron could always bail him out.

It was a bit insulting, but it wasn't like Arnold was wrong, and Villy would definitely laugh his ass off if he had to save a Jake floating about in the middle of fuck-all nowhere.

"Alright, I guess I'll be your beta tester," Jake agreed without any fight or arguments. "Now, I assume this works on the red-flag planets, right? Does it also work on the gray ones?"

"It works on every planet with a Prima Vessel on it," Arnold answered. "That includes the three marked black. While they may be designated as destroyed, there are still Prima Vessels on them."

Jake was pleasantly surprised that he could pick any planet, as that was just what he had hoped for. Thinking about it, these Prima Vessels were all incredibly durable, so they shouldn't be destroyed by C-grades fighting. Secondly, it wasn't like the planets that were marked with a black flag had all just exploded. They were still there, even if they were no longer considered actual planets.

"One more note before you go. We were forced to ensure anyone teleported would appear outside the planet's atmosphere. Those we tried to teleport inside any atmosphere found themselves destroyed as they teleported through the atmospheric layers, so you will have to find your own way through. I'm certain you can handle it," Arnold explained, which was probably another reason they had picked Jake for this thing.

"I'll get through the atmosphere somehow. I have a few ideas. Now, do you have any particular place in mind you want me to go?" Jake asked Arnold. It was his teleporter, so it was only nice to ask.

"I don't. You are free to choose yourself," Arnold said as he pressed a few buttons, and a screen was projected onto the wall. Jake instantly recognized it as identical to the one in the Prima Vessel, making Jake believe Arnold had just restreamed it.

Having an open choice for where to go, Jake considered his options. Going to a blue planet was quickly written off. He could go to those without this teleporter, and those he couldn't were part of Ell'Hakan's alliance, and he saw no reason to head there.

Red ones were the most obvious choice. They were the ones where he had the highest probability of saving the most people while knowing there was a Prima Guardian there. It was also possible planets marked with a gray flag still had Prima Guardians alive, and there were likely people to save there, too, so those two options were kind of close.

However, ultimately, Jake didn't want to head to any of these. Instead, he looked at Arnold as he pointed toward a certain planet:

The homeworld of "I" and the first planet to get marked with a black flag.

Arnold looked at the one Jake had selected and nodded. "I understand. Trying to discover more about the nature of this anomaly seems like a wise choice."

"That's also my thoughts," Jake nodded. He also desperately wanted to sate his own curiosity. What kind of world had given birth to a creature now just going around destroying worlds? What the hell had the natives done to make such a thing happen? These were all questions he would hopefully soon have an answer to.

"Step onto the teleporter once ready," Arnold said as he took out sixteen glowing cubes of metal, all overflowing with energy, and levitated them over to different focal points of the formation. Batteries of some kind to power the circle, and based on the energy Arnold had packed into them, Jake understood why they couldn't just teleport people around willy-nilly.

Jake did as told, stepping onto the teleporter. With Arnold typing away at his console, different elements of the magic circle came alive one after another. The first thing Jake felt was space itself, seemingly loosing up all around him, and through his sphere, he saw William carrying out a sleeping Sandy so they weren't in the room. Arnold had also put up some defensive barrier around himself, which really didn't make Jake feel super comfortable.

Next up, Jake felt space vibrate and stretch. Small cracks formed in reality, and for a fraction of a moment, Jake felt the presence of the void as Arnold's unique brand of magic wormed its way in. Intuitively, he knew it was about to activate.

"One final thing," Arnold said casually just before Jake was teleported away, his voice sounding distorted due to the formation. "The journey may be a bit rougher than you're used to. Just know that is entirely within expectations."

Without any further warning, Jake felt himself move as if he was yanked upwards. His vision turned dark, and his sphere began to pick up so much noise he had to rein it in to not needlessly stress himself out. He kept flying upwards for a good while before suddenly, he was flung to the side as if pulled by some invisible force.

This happened several more times as Jake was sent tumbling around in a realm of total darkness, broken up by the occasional misplaced flash of light that disappeared as fast as it had come. The entire process took over a minute before Jake was finally pulled downward, and he appeared in the real world once more.

"That was fucking scuffed," Jake cursed out loud as he worked to orient himself. The contrast between feeling as if you are being tossed around at incredible speeds to suddenly losing all momentum and coming to a standstill was jarring, to say the least.

The entire teleportation process was far from consumer-friendly and definitely not very refined yet. Still... it had seemingly gotten the job done as Jake found himself floating above a planet right outside where the atmosphere would be. He used "would be" very purposefully here... because there wasn't any atmosphere.

For a moment, Jake had even questioned if Arnold's teleporter had been even worse than first thought because he could barely recognize what he saw below him as a real planet, and definitely not one enlightened once lived on.

It looked more like some sort of asteroid. The atmosphere was entirely gone, and below, Jake felt no trace of... anything. He frowned as the sensation was so odd. He had expected to feel something. Death energy, earth energy, some kind of wind. Yet there was nothing at all.

Scouring the planet from far above using his high Perception, he could see a substantial part of it. He saw deep valleys and massive crater-like holes so large they covered most of the planet, and he soon realized these had once been oceans. There were no traces of structures anywhere on the "mountains" he assumed were once islands or continents.

It was a surreal sight, to say the least, as he kept scanning the planet carefully.

Finally, on one of the landmasses, he found what he had been looking for. It was the only structure-like thing on the entire former planet, so the Prima Vessel stuck out quite a lot. However, even the Prima Vessel was gray and had lost all its shine. What's more, it even had clear signs of damage, which was more than a little unsettling considering its durability.

Without delaying, Jake began his descent, his considerations for how he would get through the atmosphere never even relevant. Without any mana of note in the air, Jake could speed up near-constantly, allowing him to reach the surface of the former planet a lot faster than expected.

As he got closer to the Prima Vessel, he released a Pulse of Perception and saw something that made his eyes open wide. Not within the Vessel itself but what was around it. Buried beneath gray sand, he saw bones. So many bones. They looked vaguely human but were a bit off, and after some scouring of his memories, he realized they were orc skeletons.

When he landed on the ground, he also noticed something else disturbing. He had naturally used some resources getting down there... but he wasn't regenerating anything. Instead, it was the opposite. The very land itself was draining just to stand on. The effect was slight, but it was there.

Releasing another Pulse, Jake finally felt as if he caught all the skeletons, and... he couldn't even count how many there were. Hundreds of millions? Billions? It was as if the entire planet had died there.

Jake walked a bit before he knelt down and pushed enough of the sand away until he saw a bone. It was also gray, and with a slight touch, it crumbled into dust. Jake felt this dust run through his hands as he felt the sensation of a concept that made a shiver run down his spine.

Desolation.

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Chapter 966: The Concept of Desolation

Desolation...

A concept Jake knew a lot about yet felt like he barely understood. Not because he was a moron – though that could be debated - or didn't have the affinity for the concept, but because he was only a C-grade. The concept of desolation was simply not something Jake had ever expected to see in a context like this.

Not to say the concept couldn't be used by those at C-grade or even at lower grades, but this was desolation in its purest form. It wasn't just a part of some skill that had some aspects of desolation added to it. No, this was far scarier. One thing was

certain... Jake was a lot more apprehensive about this "I" character now than before. If it was a creature that could actually control the concept of desolation to this extent, this system event had just gotten a lot more dangerous than before.

One of the distinct aspects of the concept of desolation was its ability to cause "permanent" damage. As was shown when Villy removed the arm of the one from the Azureflight back in the Order, the concept wouldn't just erase the arm itself but the part of the Soulshape it usually inhabited. That meant there was no easy way to heal it, and no amount of potions or meditation would help.

Not to say it couldn't be healed... but Jake had no idea how to, and he doubted anyone on Earth knew how either. The only surefire way of healing something like that was through evolution, where you were effectively reborn. Jake had no desire to lose any limbs or anything like that, though, but the mere fact such a risk existed for him and the others from Earth was unsettling. If someone did get injured, they would likely have to wait till the event was over and find someone worth healing them in one of the larger factions in another universe.

Standing up, Jake really took in the environment and its effects on him. His energy was slowly being drained, but what's more, his resources weren't regenerating at all. Jake even felt that should he sit down and meditate, he would only be draining himself further. The source of this content is [novel★fire★net](#)

Turning to the Prima Vessel, he decided to inspect it more closely. He found that the damage caused to it was primarily surface-level, but the mere fact it had taken any damage at all was surprising. After inspecting the Vessel a bit further, he found its entrance that was unlocked after killing the Prima Guardian, which he honestly wasn't sure if he could even enter.

However, when he got close, the barrier allowed him inside. Jake even noted how it didn't seem to check his key at all but just let him enter, which definitely wasn't how it worked on other planets. At least not those with living World Leaders.

The inside of the Prima Vessel was pristine for the most part, except for one thing. Down the hallway leading to the three different rooms, a set of footprints could clearly be seen. They had left imprints that gave off the same concept of desolation as the world outside. When Jake used his foot to wipe away one of the footprints, he saw they had all been made up of gray dust and that the Vessel itself hadn't been affected.

Jake continued further into the Vessel and saw more traces of the creature that had entered it. From the form and size of its footprints and other minor clues, he estimated it was some kind of humanoid being. Oddly, it also seemed to have some kind of limp. He couldn't gather much more from what was left behind, except for the fact he only felt the concept of desolation and nothing else from all its traces.

While desolation was an incredibly powerful concept, it was also very limiting. It tended to not work well together with other affinities or concepts due to its nature. In fact, its properties made it so very few creatures natively able to use the affinity existed. In many ways, something being alive or at least possessing a soul was counter-intuitive to the concept in the first place. Desolation was all about not only non-existence but the continued state of non-existence, and a creature existing while being all about non-existence was weird.

There were some creatures and people in the multiverse well-versed with the affinity, though... Jake's very own Patron being one of its most well-known users.

To the Malefic Viper, the concept had been a part of his Path for a long time. Likely all the way back to when he was known as the Wyvern of the Desolates. At least Jake doubted it was a coincidence the snake god was known under that name back then while also being well-versed in the concept of desolation now.

Later on, desolation became one of the fundamental aspects of the malefic affinity, which was an affinity Jake couldn't even begin to understand yet. He said that, despite his own constant usage of the affinity through Touch of the Malefic Viper, the glowing dark green color broadly considered a signature aspect of the affinity.

Jake had never felt the existence of desolation when using Touch, though. He was sure it would come one day.

Arriving at the control room within the Prima Vessel, Jake saw everything was still active and working, with the only traces of the creature a bit of gray dust here and there. After only a moment of hesitation, he began seeing if he could control the Vessel. This also didn't prove any trouble, as Jake did something potentially risky and teleported the Prima Vessel down to the center of the planet.

Having seen the state of the planet's surface, he could only begin to suspect what the core looked like. That's also why he knew this wouldn't be without risk. The core room was bound to be far more dangerous than the surface of the planet, but Jake felt like he had to risk it to better understand what he was dealing with.

Going to the exit of the Prima Vessel, Jake began preparing himself. He started by summoning his Scales of the Malefic Viper, covering his entire body, followed by several powerful layers of stable arcane barriers. While doing this, Jake even used Arcane Awakening in its stable defensive form, increasing relevant stats by 50% while forming yet another layer of defense in the form of the small membrane of protective arcane energy right above the scales.

Feeling about as ready as one can be when about to enter a very hazardous environment, Jake exited the Prima Vessel. Instantly, he felt a shiver run down his spine as a sense of wrongness overwhelmed him. Everything within the core room was gray,

even Jake himself and his arcane mana; the concept of color itself seemingly made desolate.

As he looked at his defensive barrier, it quickly began fading away. Desolation was not destructive or showy. It just drained everything and anything, allowing nothing to exist. Jake looked on with wide eyes as his barriers simply faded away one after another. He had to focus while he still could as he scanned the core room.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

The colorless and lightless room made it difficult to spot anything in particular. However, locating the Planetary Core wasn't difficult. It was by far the greatest source of desolation, and Jake focused his eyes as he saw the cracked gray core that had once been the Planetary Pylon. It had been reduced to a Planetary Core and was now nearly unrecognizable.

Seeing this core brought Jake all the way back to the Tutorial, where he corrupted a Quintessence to poison all the water in the lake of those big boars. The item had been intrinsically bound to the lake, and as long as he sufficiently corrupted that, the corruption would spread to the entire lake automatically, effectively turning it poisonous permanently.

This was no different. The Planetary Core was bound to the entire planet. It was what caused the atmosphere to exist, regulated affinities, maintained balance, and was the source of constantly spawning new energy for the world. Now, it had been corrupted. Rather than do all those things, it had become the source of the planet's total destruction. It permeated desolation into every single part of the planet until, one day, the constantly growing power of desolation inside the core would become too much, making it crumble alongside the rest of the planet.

As Jake focused on the core, his final arcane barrier broke as the energy of desolation made contact with his scales of the Malefic Viper. Jake was ready to quickly charge back into the safety of the Prima Vessel as something unexpected happened. For the first time within the core room, he saw not only color but light.

His scales subtly lit up with a dark green color as the energy of desolation was stopped in its tracks entirely. That wasn't all, as Jake felt something even more unexpected next: Mana. A little bit of mana traveled from Jake's scales and into his body, restoring his mana pool.

Jake was in disbelief at what happened as he quickly recalled parts of the description of his Scales of the Malefic Viper:

"The scales are legendarily resistant to magic and will store excess mana from any magical attacks that would have otherwise damaged you... this mana will be slowly refined and be absorbed or dispersed into your surroundings."

In truth, this mana-restoring feature wasn't new; it was just pretty bad so he didn't really ever think about it. It mainly sucked because Jake didn't really get hit a lot by small constant attacks to absorb a bit at a time, but when he did get hit, it was by powerful attacks where the scales could only offer some extra resistance and nothing more. The mana he did absorb would simply be too powerful with too much quantity, resulting in the effect pretty much not doing anything.

Unless it was certain affinities, that is. Scales were incredibly potent at absorbing the light affinity, as one example, and for any poison-based mana, it was straight-up overpowered.

Now, he'd discovered another affinity that the scales were incredibly effective against, and it had come at just the right time as Jake smiled.

The formerly scary environment Jake was incredibly apprehensive about even approaching had, in an instant, turned from a danger into an opportunity. With gusto, Jake tried opening his mouth as he breathed some of the desolate energy in, and-

Jake felt all the energy drain from his internals; his tissue began to die as it was emptied of all energy, and one of his lungs had a part of it begin to smolder like it was made of ash. Never before had Jake shut up so fast, as luckily, new energy flooded in and restored the damage done in an instant, leaving no traces except for a lesson learned:

This place was still fucking dangerous even if he now had a method to exist there. In retrospect, it was a bit as if he was wearing a space suit and decided to open the helmet and take a deep breath... in other words, really moronic.

Having learned not to be too much of an idiot, Jake focused on the sensation of his scales absorbing the desolate energy. It was odd to imagine that the concept of nothingness could be turned into mana like that, and Jake seriously didn't understand how it worked... but it seemed like he was on his way to finding out.

The process by which his scales made the constant attack of desolate energy into mana wasn't only dependent on the scales but a skill specialized in turning harmful energies into resources: *Palate of the Malefic Viper*.

In other words, Jake wasn't just absorbing mana from the environment; he was also absorbing knowledge and Records related to the concept of desolation. A little bit at a time, and with how complicated the concept was, this wouldn't be a fast process if he wanted to actually learn anything useful. If he stayed in this core chamber for a prolonged period, Jake did believe he would benefit, but he just didn't have that kind of time in the middle of a system event. If he wanted to really benefit, he reckoned he

would have to stay there for a few years at least, which did suck as this wasn't the kind of opportunity one could come across often.

Encountering a C-grade version of the concept of desolation wasn't something Jake had ever expected. This was at a level where Jake stood a chance at absorbing and understanding it. An environment like this wasn't something the Viper or anyone else could artificially create, and even if there likely were quite a few members of the Order who could use the concept of desolation to some extent, he doubted any of them could use such a pure version as he was experienced right now.

Leaving a place like this was truly a waste... but he didn't have much of a choice.

Going to this planet had still been totally worth it, though. Jake had learned something very useful about his Scales of the Malefic Viper, learned a bit about the creature known as "I," and now even absorbed some Records related to desolation.

Not to say he was fully ready to leave quite yet. With his scales, he felt confident to get closer to the core, as he still wanted to learn more about how this entire planet had become this way. Floating within the monochrome chamber, Jake approached the core as the energy began to overwhelm him when he got too close. His scales definitely had a threshold, and Jake had to stop a bit away as he carefully inspected the core, trying to get a feel for what the creature had done to it.

Making use of his stupidly high Perception, Jake scanned the core. It turned out he didn't really have to try that hard to figure out what had happened, though, as he shook his head. "Crazy fucking bastard."

Jake had many theories about how "I" had corrupted a Planetary Core. Everything from grand rituals to being in possession of some incredibly powerful item akin to Eternal Hunger... yet the answer was far more simple. What the lunatic creature had done was by far the most simplistic and risky method... it infused its very soul into the Planetary Core, using itself as the catalyst of corruption.

This not only left the creature vulnerable during the entire corruption process, but risked losing parts of its soul in the process. Especially when dealing with a concept as dangerous as desolation. Even if Jake was taken aback had to admit this discovery was quite a relief.

It proved the creature wasn't some ritual expert or anything like that. Shit, Jake was confident he would be better at corrupting a World Core. A lot faster, too.

Continuing to look at the core, Jake took in the intense and powerful energy it gave off. As he stood there staring, an idea began to form in his head. Turning around, Jake headed back into the Prima Vessel and to the teleportation room there. There, he made sure it worked as he checked to see if he could teleport back to Earth, something he could, and he didn't even have to put in an application but could teleport straight there.

Having confirmed that, Jake headed back out of the Vessel once more. Floating toward the Planetary Core, Jake was thinking as he shook his head before muttering out loud.

"No... it would be too much..."

But... with the cracks already in the core and its unstable nature and clearly lowered durability...

"Yeah... I should be able to handle a good mouthful of it, at least."

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Chapter 967: Advanced Meal Prepping

A C-grade eating a Planetary Core? Yeah, that was such a ridiculous notion it wasn't even worth thinking about, even if it was a broken core. Jake had said it before, but there was no way for a C-grade to consume all the energy within a core, and besides, when the core was removed from a planet, it would lose connection and naturally grow far less powerful and lose many of its properties.

But... what if Jake didn't try to eat the Planetary Core but just a little piece of it? Just a good chunk seeped in the potent C-grade desolation affinity energy. That couldn't be too harmful, right? Yeah, it should be fine, what's the worst that can happen?

Alright, the worst case was Jake accidentally killing himself, but he believed in the powers of the Malefic Viper. He wouldn't eat this fragment of the core any normal way but store it within the internal stomach of Palate of the Malefic Viper to then slowly absorb the energy over a long period of time.

Even if it turned out Jake couldn't handle eating the core fragment, he remained fairly confident he would get out of it alive. At least, he assumed so, remembering everything that had happened with the Dark Witch when he got his last skill upgrade. Recalling parts of the description, Jake felt pretty confident.

"Natural treasures can be swallowed... If the item is not a toxin, the item will still be refined but at a slower pace... allows the Alchemist to fully consume a swallowed item, destroying it in the process if possible. If the item cannot be destroyed or the result of its destruction is too violent, the Alchemist will suffer a backlash, and the internal space will be damaged."

Clearly, the skill could absorb something like a fragment of the core. The only big questions were if the "failsafe" of destroying the item for immediate consumption would even work, and if it did work, would the backlash potentially prove lethal? Even if it did... it wasn't like Jake didn't have more tricks up his sleeve.

Right now, he still just had a legendary Blightroot from the gifts the Risen gave him during the Chosen ceremony, but now he wanted to replace it with something even more dangerous than a root of pure death. As a legendary item, he naturally still had much to absorb from it, but a part of this core would be so much more valuable.

Well... as the saying goes, nothing ventured, nothing gained. One had to take big risks to get big rewards, and Jake had never been the risk-averse sort. With that in mind, Jake made himself commit by getting the Blightroot out of his Palate stomach and into his regular storage.

As a final precaution, Jake quickly entered the Prima Vessel and took out one of the devices given by Arnold to communicate with people back on Earth. However, it couldn't reach all the way back to Arnold, and he wasn't sure if it was because he was inside the Vessel or too far away, but he quickly got an idea. This text is hosted at [novel^{*}fire^{*}.net](http://novel.fire.net)

Taking the device, Jake purposefully summoned his Alchemist's Flame and destroyed it. He remembered Miranda had a skill to contact him that was tailor-made for the task, and he gambled on that working... and considering he felt a telepathic prope not even two minutes later, he was indeed correct.

"What's going on? Arnold reported one of your communication devices broke. Are you okay?" Miranda asked in a worried voice, which made Jake feel a bit bad as he quickly reassured her.

"I'm fine, no cause for concern, but I needed a way to quickly contact you. Can you make sure to clear out the Prima Vessel on Earth for me? I may bring something pretty dangerous back, and it would be best if there weren't anyone around," Jake asked quickly.

"Can't we clear out the area around one of the other teleportation circles? The Sword Saint and Eron are still on Earth, so they could potentially render assistance," Miranda asked, likely assuming Jake would drag back some monster.

"No, best to keep everything contained within the Prima Vessel... but having Eron around might be a good idea. Ask him to go to the Prima Vessel and be ready, but only if he is confident in handling the concept of desolation," Jake said after some thought.

"I will... wait, why are you talking about the concept of desolation? What the hell are you doing?" Miranda asked, and Jake got the feeling much of her concern had now been replaced with an understanding of what Jake was up to – an understanding he gladly fully confirmed.

"Something very reckless and probably a little dumb," Jake said, unable to hold back a small smile.

"Just don't get yourself killed... and good luck," Miranda sighed on the other end, not even arguing or asking for more details. Something Jake appreciated.

"Thanks. See you in not that long if things work out," Jake finished the conversation as he returned his attention to the task at hand. He was even a bit proud of himself that he had the forethought to take precautions and clear out the Prima Vessel back on Earth. There was definitely a point in his life the thought wouldn't have even crossed his mind.

Anyway, with that handled, now he just also had to figure out how to break a part of the core off. Normally, Jake wouldn't even have considered it an option, but this was a very special case. The core was already cracked in many places due to the powerful energy of desolation, making it far less durable. Secondly, one of the properties of desolation was that even things that hadn't turned completely desolate yet became a lot more brittle.

The Prima Vessel was a good example of that, and Jake even tested his theory after leaving the Prima Vessel again by taking out Eternal Hunger, and with some struggle, he could leave cutting marks on its surface. There was no way he could do the same back on Earth, but simply being in this environment, the Vessel's durability had been significantly reduced. He did notice after cutting it that it seemed to have an even tougher inner shell, but with time, chances are the desolation would still manage to seep through.

Jake wasn't sure that would ever happen, though. It would take a lot of time, after all, and he didn't believe this core chamber had a lot of time left. The core would naturally break far before the Prima Vessel would, and even if it didn't, Jake was about to break stuff all on his own.

Looking at the core more closely, using both his eyes and his sphere, he circled around a bit, trying to find the best weak point. Soon enough, he found somewhere the crack went deep and had a good angle for what Jake was planning.

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He did a bit more testing to see if what he wanted to do was viable, and he quickly hit some problems. As getting close to the core wasn't the healthiest, Jake wanted to shoot a Protean Arrow designed to function as a wedge to break apart the core.

However, when he tried to test by channeling an Arcane Powershot, he quickly found the first issue. The arcane energy Jake gave off actively fought and was suppressed by the environment, and what's more, even the bow began to take in some energy of desolation. Not a lot, and it wasn't a problem, but it was concerning.

He also began to question if the arrow would even remain stable for long enough. Even if it didn't outright get dismantled, would it work properly as a wedge? It would turn brittle, especially that close to the core.

Quickly, he put away his bow, shelving that plan. Instead, he took out the one weapon he knew would be fine even in this environment. As expected, Eternal Hunger didn't – to put it politely – give a flying fuck about some C-grade desolation energy being pumped out by a corrupted Planetary Core.

Jake did feel an innate sense of disgust from the weapon, though. The concept of desolation was nearly the exact opposite of the sin curse of hunger. Desolation didn't consume anything. It just removed energy and did so no energy could ever return. If desolation won, there would be nothing to eat, something the curse innately felt and couldn't accept.

Trying to absorb any of this energy of desolation would also be incredibly stupid, as all it would do was slightly weaken the energy of the curse. On a funny side note, using the concept of desolation was one of the most effective methods of getting rid of curses or safely destroying cursed objects. Normally, if you destroyed something like Eternal Hunger, you would just let all the curse energy loose, but if you forcefully filled it with the energy of desolation, it would kill the curse until the weapon turned into dust.

To clarify, this wasn't a risk here. Even if Eternal Hunger somehow managed to absorb this entire Planetary Core, it wouldn't have much of an adverse effect on the curse. There was simply a far too big difference in power between the two.

Either way, with archery out of the question, Jake had to stick with Eternal Hunger. Luckily, the weapon had some very useful properties for this type of scenario. Continuing to inspect the cracks in the core, Jake began to slowly change the shape of Eternal Hunger to something more suitable for the job.

Once he was done, he mentally and physically prepared himself. Having to enter melee, Jake would take a far higher risk as he would have to get right up to the large Planetary Core and try to break a good part of it off.

Focusing more on his Scales of the Malefic Viper, he pushed the skill as far as he could. While he would have loved some fortunate moment of enlightenment and an upgrade, he wasn't quite there yet. Finally, before it was go-time, Jake held nothing back as Arcane Awakening activated fully and wings sprung from his back.

Here goes nothing, Jake thought as he flew forward, the powerful energy of desolation washing over him the closer he got to the core. Dozens of arcane barriers were summoned to take off some of the heat, but they would only do this much in an environment where summoning anything outside his body was borderline impossible. His scales struggled, some of them cracking as Jake quickly summoned new ones, and

he felt some of the energy begin to enter his body, his destructive energy rushing to cancel out the desolation.

Jake couldn't do this for long... but he held on, and soon, he was right in front of the core. He lifted the weapon he would use to break this core right open as quite an odd sight played out that would definitely have made any observers have a second take.

Eternal Hunger, a mythical weapon born from an ancient curse from a long-forgotten vampiric land, fused with the simulacrum from another system-created reality, and undoubtedly one of, if not the most powerful weapons in the entire ninety-third universe, was currently transformed into an oversized crowbar that Jake slammed into the crack in the Planetary Core.

With a subdued yell, as he really didn't want to open his mouth, he used all his strength on the crowbar to try and pry the huge core of desolation open, yet it remained stuck in the crack. Feeling the pressure only mounting more, Jake did something even more risky, as he trusted the one thing he could always trust: his boots.

He had wanted to avoid directly touching the core, but he saw no other choice as he stepped down on the core for increased leverage. Instantly, he felt the rush of energy trying to invade his body, with its first target being the boots it directly touched.

The foolish concept did not know the foe it had encountered. The Best Boots proved far more resilient to desolation than even his scales, shrugging it off entirely. This looked like a good thing on the surface, except the boots didn't really stop the energy from attacking Jake, and while it was nice enough to have his feet mostly spared, his legs remained open season.

Not that Jake planned on standing on the core for long. With increased leverage and a good yank, Jake felt the core give way. With another good pull, he finally managed to crack the whole core wide open and break it apart... but...

Fuck.

Jake had wanted to split a good piece off, and the way it was cracked, Jake hoped to only eat about a fifth of the entire core. Maybe a quarter. What Jake had instead done was break the core infuriatingly cleanly in half, leaving two giant halves of the core slowly floating apart as a torrent of desolate energy rushed over Jake, forcing him to retreat. Even so, he was still heavily inflicted as a lot of energy got through his scales, making his skin and much of his flesh turn gray.

Eating half a core was way too much... way more than he had planned.

He had to make a decision here and now. The entire core room was shaking as it was about to collapse with the core no longer keeping it together, and the rush of desolation making all the cave walls so much more brittle, making much of it crumble on its own.

His gaze darted to the Prima Vessel and back to the two halves of the core floating apart as he cursed internally at his own reckless stupidity and refusal to give up.

Fuuuck!

Opening his mouth, Jake's stubbornness had won out. One of the two halves – the ever-so-slightly smaller one – began to shrink as it flew toward Jake and straight into his Palate of the Malefic Viper's stomach. Before he could even register it was fully in there, he moved.

Flying toward the Prima Vessel, he saw the barrier blocking the entrance fading away as he entered the hallway of the Vessel, the barrier fully fading behind him when he passed it. Desolation invaded the Vessel as Jake flew for the teleportation room as quickly as he could, with the only signs of the desolation following him that the hallway turned entirely gray in his wake.

Inside him, he felt the consumed half of the Planetary Core settle as it pumped out vast amounts of desolation, Jake gritting his teeth as he focused as best he could to keep it contained until he was in relative safety.

Arriving at the teleporter, Jake didn't hesitate a single moment before he activated it to teleport back to Earth. The entire Vessel was shaking, and through his sphere, he knew it was currently in movement and falling, the ground it had been standing on having given out due to the instability of the entire core room.

With everything shaking and the desolation flooding toward the chamber, the teleporter couldn't activate fast enough. Jake's eyes were wide as the colorless presence entered the chamber, but just before it reached the edge of the teleportation circle and destroyed it, Jake's vision turned black as he was whisked away.

He appeared within the Prima Vessel back on Earth near-instantly, but he didn't have any time to think about how much better this teleportation was than Arnold's. The moment he returned, Jake sat down in meditation and closed his eyes, as one thing was clear...

Jake had bitten off a lot more than he could chew. Scratch that, he hadn't even tried to chew it but swallowed the damn thing whole, and he was now in for perhaps the worst case of food poisoning imaginable... likely even worse than the result of eating supermarket sushi on its last best-by date.

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Chapter 968: Understanding the Scales of Desolation

A pulsing sensation echoed through Jake's entire body and soul as waves of desolation were released from within himself, seeking to spread out from its containment. This situation was very different from the scenario with the Dark Witch. Back then, he had a volatile and explosive core, but the Half-a-Planetary Core Jake had eaten this time around was the exact opposite of volatile.

In many ways, it was far scarier than something that just went boom. Jake didn't even feel any pressure on the inner walls of the Palate stomach, nor did he feel any pain. He just felt a sense of emptiness and numbness wherever the desolation passed. It was honestly soothing and relaxing, making Jake think that it was okay to just relax. Perhaps he should even take a nap.

However, he still knew his situation wasn't good, and his survival instinct was fully engaged, as surrendering to the calmness and letting his consciousness fade away would mean he would never wake up again. He tried different methods to handle the desolation, but it quickly became clear there was simply too much energy to handle.

Palate of the Malefic Viper's internal stomach was a separate space within Jake's Soulspace, where anything he ate was sealed within and slowly extracted of energy and Records. Now, the walls were being made desolate faster than they could absorb the energy, which forced Jake to not try and suppress all the energy of the core, but let some slip through and into his body.

To fight back, whenever desolation washed over him, a wave of destructive arcane energy followed, destroying and canceling out the energy of desolation. This did have the problem that Jake repeatedly hurt his own body, and things were far from ideal. He still had options if things continued like this... but just then, he felt something.

A warm flow of energy came over him, as he felt the parts he destroyed with his arcane energy be restored. He had been so focused on the fighting within himself that he hadn't noticed the external world at all, nor the man who now stood in the chamber with him. Jake wanted to open his eyes, but he stopped when a message entered his mind.

"Focus on doing what you must do. I shall maintain the integrity of your body in the meantime," Eron's voice echoed in Jake's mind. As he spoke, even more energy fell over Jake's body as the desolation still lingering was rapidly pushed back by what felt like a tidal wave of pure vital energy.

The bane of desolation was something too powerful or too filled with energy to make desolate... and Eron was like an endless wellspring of pure vital energy. Jake truly didn't know how much energy Eron had, but in that moment, he had an odd sense of

confidence that should this be a battle of endurance between the consumed core and Eron, the healer wouldn't be on the losing side.

That wasn't what Jake wanted, though. He didn't want the core "fixed" of its desolation, and every bit of energy that seeped out of the Palate's stomach and into the rest of his being was a loss. Still, with Eron now watching over Jake, he could fully refocus on his internal realm without worrying about his body becoming an empty husk devoid of energy and life in the meantime.

Using Serene Soul Meditation, Jake let his consciousness enter his own Soulspace. Opening his eyes within the vast realm that was his soul, Jake took everything in. The shadowy figure representing Eternal Hunger, the single drop of blood floating in the middle of nothingness giving off extreme power, and the sky the color of his arcane affinity all struck his eye first, as he took in the world representing his own soul.

The stomach created by Palate wasn't in this space, and yet it kind of was. It was like another layer of space, separated from the rest of his Soulspace. Perhaps this was by design to protect the user of the skill, but it was clearly still connected. If it was not, how else would the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper have ever appeared within his true Soulspace after he consumed it using Palate?

Focusing, he observed Palate's stomach more closely than before. He was still purposefully allowing it to leak out energy to not flood the stomach. It was a bit like if the core constantly leaked water into a limited container, and if Jake didn't allow some of it out, the Palate stomach would end up bursting. To stop that from happening, Jake would really only have one of five choices:

Firstly, he could purposefully explode the stomach and destroy the core while suffering a backlash. The second option was the simplest one, as he could always just spit out the core... though that would definitely turn the inside of the Prima Vessel into a permanent no-go zone, and Jake would probably have to ask Arnold to send the entire thing into empty space to avoid a disaster in the future. Option three was to not allow the stomach to leak into his body, but try and redirect everything into his real Soulspace, but Jake seriously didn't know the consequences of that. Of course, besides these three options, he could also just try and hope things would eventually work out on their own as he let more and more desolation leak out into his body with expectations that Eron could keep it at bay until the core weakened enough for Jake to be able to handle it. Needless to say, this option was shit, and honestly, the other three weren't exactly appealing either.

His fifth and final option was one most others wouldn't even consider. Not because it was a bad idea but because it wasn't at all feasible, especially not in a situation like this.

The fundamental source of all Jake's problems was that his Palate of the Malefic Viper couldn't handle the core. Jake was the type who liked the easiest solutions to the most complicated of issues, and the easiest way to handle this was to simply make his Palate

capable of withstanding the Desolation Core, as Jake had just impromptu decided to call it.

But... how would he do that?

Standing within his Soulspace, Jake honestly didn't think that option three – to simply release the desolation into his Soulspace – would do him much harm, but he did fear that it would effectively waste all the desolation energy within the core.

If Jake was dealing with any other kind of extremely dense energy source, he would be afraid of it exploding or something like that, but desolation didn't work like that. Jake imagined it would just flood his Soulspace, wake up an annoyed Eternal Hunger, or even encounter the droplet of blood from the Viper and end up being erased entirely. Of course, that assumed it even got that far and wasn't annihilated by the passive environment within Jake's soul.

Also, as to why he was currently leaking desolation energy into his body to lessen the pressure and not into his soul... well, Jake didn't know how to only pour a little into his Soulspace. He was only confident in effectively breaking down the wall and letting it all in, which, again, wouldn't lead to anything productive or good.

However, Jake was convinced he still needed to break down that wall. He just had to do so very purposefully and with proper preparation. The problem was that right now, the stomach created by Palate only relied on the Records of Palate itself, which limited it far too much. If Jake wanted it to be able to withstand something like half a Planetary Core, he needed it to fully rely on Jake's overpowered soul. At least, that's what he believed.

As mentioned, he couldn't just let everything flood into the Soulspace, though. He would need for it to be far more controlled, and as Jake considered what to do, he got an idea. However, he wasn't sure how feasible it was nor how time-consuming it would be.

Without waiting around just theorizing, Jake planned to test out what he was thinking. While still within his Soulspace, he activated Scales of the Malefic Viper on his manifested form. The scales appeared, and Jake watched them closely as he tried to pry one off. Once he did, it turned into energy, disappearing instantly. Frowning, Jake tried something else. With his arcane energy, he formed a barrier and tried to make a scale appear on the barrier, but it didn't work either.

Undeterred, Jake tried several more things until finally, he reached some level of success by doing something a bit brutal. Scraping off a sheet of his own flesh, Jake purposefully didn't let it disappear as he made it float in the air. With focus, he then made scales grow on the flesh as Jake nodded, satisfied.

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This... can work. But it will not be fast... and Scales isn't good enough yet either, I think.

He had ideas, but none of them were fast. They all required time, and Jake didn't know how much time he had. It was all dependent on his current healer, and rather than wonder on his own, Jake dedicated some of his attention to reaching out telepathically to Eron, communicating his intentions. The response he got was instant.

"Dispel all worry; I shall provide you all the time you desire. In fact, I implore you to not be too fast. An opportunity to encounter a C-grade version of desolation is a valuable experience, and it would sadden me to have this fortunate moment be too short," Eron answered, sounding like he very much enjoyed healing Jake's body, which was constantly in a state of being made desolate.

With a go-ahead from the local medical team, Jake didn't hesitate any longer as he began to put his plan into motion. As to what his bat-shit plan was?

Well... he wanted to effectively create a "vessel" within his Soulspace for the Palate stomach to occupy. That was the oversimplification, anyway. The space within the stomach of Palate was integral and not anything he could afford to mess with. Anything swallowed wasn't just slowly being consumed but also refined by Touch of the Malefic Viper at an accelerated pace, and that wasn't something he could afford to lose.

So, Jake would need the stomach to exist within his Soulspace, yet still not be entirely within his Soulspace. His solution? An actual physical barrier within the metaphysical realm of his soul. A wall made of something with the innate properties of absorbing any energy it encountered and feeding it back to Palate. A wall made of scales from Scales of the Malefic Viper.

To clarify, Jake definitely didn't actually know what he was doing or if this would at all work how he expected... but he sure as hell hoped it would. If he could connect his Palate more closely with the rest of his Soulspace, he could rely on the full power of his soul with Scales and create a feedback loop even when he ate things too powerful. Based on the power of his soul, Jake even theorized that should he succeed, having eaten the full Desolation Core wouldn't have been impossible.

All things in good time, though. For now, Jake had to deal with the most pressing issues: his scales simply not being good enough for what he wanted to do in their current form. Right now, they had a lot of waste and Jake also wasn't sure if his silly plan would work if Palate was at a higher level than Scales.

Plus, Jake had already commented before how he felt close to an upgrade with Scales. He didn't really have the time back then to truly focus on improving the skill, though, but now he most certainly did. Finally, the circumstances for working on the upgrade were great, as Jake could really experiment with what he wanted to do.

Splitting his focus between his internal world and the external one, he covered his body with scales in the real world, allowing some of the desolation to seep all the way through and into the scales. Eron got massive credit as he noticed Jake purposefully led some of the desolation to his scales, and didn't interfere but just healed everything Jake dragged the desolate energy through on the way. The latest_ept_sodes are on_the novel·fire·net

Jake observed closely how the desolation didn't affect the scales like it did everything else. His scales were the only thing Jake had seen that wasn't outright made desolate when encountering the energy, and as he observed them... he understood why, and he couldn't help but smile a bit at the explanation.

Had it all backward...

From the get-go, Jake had assumed the scales were just supremely resistant to the concept of desolation, however, he now realized that he had it wrong from the beginning. It wasn't because the scales weren't made desolate... it was that they already were desolate from the very beginning.

All the scales encountering desolation did was activate the inherent concept already existing within them and empowered it until the concept of desolation became too strong and overwhelmed everything else within the scale. From the outside, it looked and felt the same, but the difference was far from negligible.

Jake made full use of his high Perception as he dove into the inner workings of his scales as best he could to really understand them more. As he did so, he realized just how complex those small dark green things really were. They were like marvels of magical engineering, perfectly evolved and improved over time as the Viper grew in power. From the time he was a small snake to a wyvern and finally a dragon... but that understanding wasn't entirely accurate either, as Jake realized something the more he looked at the scales.

He had already thought of Scales of the Malefic Viper as being the scales of a dragon. Why wouldn't he? Dragon scales were known as one of the most powerful natural defenses any race had in the entire multiverse.

However, the more closely he looked at his scales now, the more he realized they weren't truly the scales of a dragon, even if they looked and felt incredibly similar. They weren't made to simply resist magic but to absorb and consume it, and their form was... off. They were too thin and weren't hard and tough like dragon scales tended to be.

Jake once more could only sigh at his own lack of understanding. His Patron wasn't the Malefic Dragon, now was he? He was the Malefic Viper. The forefather of all snakes. Why would his legacy skill include dragon scales and not something that evolved beyond that? They were snake scales and had always been.

Actively pushing, Jake began to try and manipulate his scales even as desolation kept pouring into them. He felt the process during which the desolation within them was activated when encountering the concept and remembered that sensation. He still had fuck-all understanding of desolation as a concept, but his scales clearly knew it very well.

Minutes turned to hours as time passed, and Jake kept exploring the sensation of his scales. How they absorbed the energy, the connection with Palate, their inner workings as best he could... and the more he explored them, the more he realized how much he had yet to uncover. He had put off truly trying to understand his scales for too long and could only marvel at their ingenuity and infinite complexity. It was like he had just climbed out of a pit and saw an entire world before him, yet to explore.

However, what he did find and was able to awaken was enough for the system to recognize his efforts and reward him with an upgrade that was perhaps long overdue. There was nothing flashy about the upgrade, which shouldn't be surprising, as desolation tended not to be.

[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] --> [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] (Rarity Unchanged)

[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper's scales are the first, and often the only required, line of defense. These scales harken back to the days the Malefic Viper lived as a dragon and retain many of these draconic properties... but the Malefic Viper is far more than just a dragon. Allows the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn parts of his skin into scales, vastly increasing the effect of Toughness and adding a certain damage threshold. All damage below the threshold is nullified. You have further awakened inherent concepts within the scales, making them more durable and allowing you to turn a portion of all damage taken desolate while making your scales poisonous to the touch when they are infused with mana. The scales are legendarily resistant to magic and will store excess mana from any magical attacks that would have otherwise damaged you. If the damage taken by the scales is above the threshold of the scales, take it directly with a portion made desolate or dispersed into your immediate surroundings. Otherwise, this mana will be slowly refined and absorbed using your current level of Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary) if possible. Passively provides 9 Toughness per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade version). May your scales be as perennial as the Malefic One, those foolish enough to touch them waste away, and the very sight of your scales let all know that resistance is futile.

As always, these damn descriptions of the Viper's Legacy skills only got longer and longer with every upgrade. But to highlight the changes... Jake had successfully managed to unlock some of the concepts within the scales, more accurately, some of their inherent desolation that was part of the malefic affinity. This resulted in even better

defenses against both magical and physical attacks, though the actual effectiveness of this was yet to be determined.

One other thing was that his scales were now poisonous to the touch when infused with mana. In all honesty, Jake hadn't even actively tried to awaken this part, it was just something he stumbled upon when exploring the scales.

Finally, the description now also directly specified it absorbed energy using Palate of the Malefic Viper. Oh yeah, there was also the fact he now got more Toughness from the skill, but that was the most expected outcome.

With the upgrade done, Jake quickly took status of himself. In the outside world, Eron still looked like he was having a swell time healing Jake, which made Jake decide to continue with his plan.

Using these empowered scales, Jake wanted to build a cocoon or a sphere or something within his Soulspace to contain the Palate stomach within. Something he promptly started doing as sheets of human skin began floating off his body with scales growing on them, as a massive sphere was slowly being formed. He had to make sure it was perfectly made, but even so, doubt remained.

Jake was far from certain this idea would work with his current version of Palate. There was a good reason not a single one of Jake's skills was fully represented within his Soulspace, outside of maybe Eternal Shadow, but that was bound to his mythical weapon.

To allow the skill to manifest within his Soulspace would be to integrate it far more deeply with Jake than anything else, and Jake honestly had no idea how to do that. He could temporarily manifest a skill within his Soulspace, but this wouldn't be that.

But... he still wanted to give it a try, though he had a feeling he would need something more than just time and hard work to get any kind of result. Which did make him wonder...

What would happen if Jake Juice was used within his own Soulspace, and what would its effects be when interacting with a skill where its Origin was his good friend Villy?

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Chapter 969: Something Incredibly Questionable

Jake had never used his Jake Juice on a skill before. In fact, he wasn't even entirely sure how to do it. So far, he had only really used it for two things. The first one was naturally amplifying Primeval Origins within existing items, making them incredibly valuable and unique treasures. He had even done it to some of his arcane mana for a very interesting result.

The thing is, using it on anything external was very different from using it on a specific part of himself, such as a skill. In fact, using it on himself was still something Jake had never truly done.

To say he had used the Origin Energy or Jake Juice on himself during fight fight with Valdemar wasn't entirely accurate, either. It was more correct to say he had used it on his Bloodline, and while Jake and his Bloodline were intrinsically intertwined, there was still a big difference.

Origin Energy came from Jake's Bloodline in the first place, so it was only to be expected it was capable of handling the energy. Moreover, Jake didn't have to think about applying it to his Bloodline. It wasn't a conscious action made with intent... it was pure instinct. Jake viewed it as fully awakening his survival instinct, choosing fight over anything else.

All of this is to say Jake had to figure out how to use his Origin Energy on a skill before he could get further, and even then, he had no idea what the result would be. He was also very skeptical if it would even work, but he hoped that with Palate of all skills, it would have some kind of positive effect.

Palate was all about absorbing stuff, after all. Jake reckoned it had built-in concepts and Records related to consuming and integrating energy, and hopefully, Origin Energy would be something it could gulp up for a big upgrade. If not, something else interesting was bound to happen, right?

As for what aspects Jake wanted to upgrade... he wasn't sure either, and in all honesty, he wasn't under the delusion he could actually control what would happen. When Jake used Origin Energy, he never controlled it. He simply let it be the impetus of change, allowing something to return to its Origin.

Using it on Palate should allow it to at least transform into something closer to its Origin, right? Jake asked himself, and the more he thought about it, the more he thought he was onto something. Maybe Villy could even somehow interfere and give a hand like he'd done when Jake consumed the drop of blood. He was the Origin of his own skill, after all.

With a bit more confidence, Jake sat down within his own Soulspace and observed the separate space where the Palate stomach was currently being made desolate by the Planetary Core. He considered if he could just try and pour Origin Energy into the stomach, but that felt wrong. It would also be odd if the way to apply this unique energy

worked only on Palate. No, Jake would need some universal method, and as he thought about it, he quickly formed some kind of idea.

Eternal Shadow had a visual representation in the form of the shadowy version of himself. Eternal Hunger had taken on after fully merging with Sim-Jake. Jake could also manifest his actual skills within his Soulspace, so Jake wondered... couldn't he create some kind of symbol representing a skill in there?

The Soulspace was all metaphysical and metaphorical nonsense in the first place with what form objects and other things took in there. Usually, it was mostly empty, with Jake's being a bit weird as he had eaten some stuff that he chose to house in his soul – something that seriously wasn't recommended – but he still didn't see why one couldn't create some physical manifestation of a skill, same as Jake could manifest his own body in there.

These manifestations would just be representations of Records. A mental connection with the skills of sorts.

Jake thought about how he would go about this as he considered his skills for a moment. What was the simplest skill to really represent? Without even thinking much, one instantly sprung to mind, and willfully, Jake manifested it... yeah, he was honestly a bit surprised it worked.

Within the Soulspace, another person appeared. A large, muscular, and shirtless man, covered in blood and wounds, wielding an axe made from the fang of a dragon, stood there with a bit grin a moment later, seemingly a frame frozen in time. It was naturally an image of Valdemar from the vision of when he'd beaten the living hell out of Villy back in the day.

This was the first thing that sprung to mind. Perhaps it was because of Jake's recent plot where he used the skill to fool others, but the Valdemar from Path of the Heretic-Chosen's vision was also such a vivid memory burned into his mind. If he thought about Fangs of Man, no other representation could do it justice.

It also felt right. Like the image in front of Jake truly did contain Records of the skill. Smiling to himself, he had to admit that perhaps he had overthought this entire thing about manifesting skills, as it did seem to come down to one simple question:

What was the first thing he thought of when thinking about a particular skill?

To confirm he was right, he tried with a few other examples, as he purposefully stopped thinking as much and just thoughtlessly summoned the first thing that sprung to mind, starting out with the easy ones. When he thought about his Arcane Arrows skill, an arrow that was constantly shifting between two forms appeared, looking as simple as the skill was. Arcane Powershot, Jake saw an image of himself in his usual draw-stance. Many of his skills were incredibly simple like this.

A few other skills were a bit odder, though. When Jake thought about One Step, Thousand Miles, he just summoned his old boots, perhaps because he had begun to associate those with the act of stepping down now. Meanwhile, a skill like Core Manipulation of ended up just showing him an image of Jake giving Vesperia head pats... followed by Arcane Curse Manifestation showing him the cursed figure of Temlat after his transformation.

There were a few other odd ones, but some also just didn't work at all. In fact, the majority didn't seem to work properly, perhaps because Jake just didn't have any set mental image associated with them. At least not one strong enough for it to manifest with the current method Jake was using... a method that was really just him trying to forcibly be impulsive. So, chances were that nothing would appear if there wasn't one singular powerful image that sprung to mind when he thought about a skill.

Some skills had kind of the opposite problem. Big Game Hunter didn't show anything, but it wasn't because he didn't have any vivid images in mind. He simply had too many thoughts associated with the skill. When he actively tried, he managed to summon several different representations, such as one of him fighting the Badger Den Mother all the way back in the Tutorial or even his fight against the B-grade within Minaga's Labyrinth Challenge Dungeon. All were valid representations of that skill and seemed to work.

Jake wasn't really sure if what he was currently practicing was at all useful outside of being a fun thought exercise to anyone but himself and what he hoped to accomplish next. The implications if things did work out were huge, though... because if he could infuse his skills with Origin Energy and upgrade them like this, it would be incredible.

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He summoned many mental images during this little practice session and quickly dispelled them all as he focused on a single skill: *Palate of the Malefic Viper*.

For this one, he had a clear mental image already. One that he wasn't the proudest of when he saw it.

What appeared was a small black snake about to eat a blue glowing mushroom. It was from the vision Jake had seen from the mural back during the Tutorial before he had even gotten the skill himself.

To Jake, *Palate* was significantly associated with beginnings. It was the very first Legacy skill Jake had chosen from his profession all the way back at level 5 in the skill. Without a doubt, it was the most instrumental skill to Jake's Path as an alchemist, and so had it been for the Viper all the way back when he began his Path. It had been what truly got him started, and the mushroom wasn't without symbolism either, as Jake had eaten way too many of those little fuckers.

That was why, despite not being very proud of what he summoned – and how potentially heretical some people would even find it – he wasn't surprised at it. Jake just smiled as he knew it was time to gamble.

He had already wasted more than enough time doing all his practice, and despite Eron clearly being fine with things dragging out, Jake didn't want to risk potentially taking some permanent damage from the desolation or wasting too much of the core's energy by being a slowpoke.

Jake sat down with his legs crossed in front of the small snake that was no longer than his own forearm. He focused as a small magic circle appeared beneath the snake and mushroom and Jake teleported himself and the image so the image appeared within the cocoon of scales he'd made earlier. Jake took a deep breath as the small snake and mushroom were nestled within, and he knew it was time. Holding out a hand, he reached deep within himself... and pulled. Discover more novels at [novel~fire~net](http://novel-fire.net)

The sound of a heartbeat echoed throughout the entire Soulspace, making everything shudder. Jake pulled again as a second heartbeat sounded out, and in his hand, a small string of energy reached out and went toward the small snake and mushroom.

With a final push and a third heartbeat more powerful than those prior, the string connected with the snake...

And at that moment, Jake knew:

This was not going to go according to plan.

Sometimes it was good with a holiday. Alright, it wasn't as if Vilastromoz was actually taking time off and doing nothing, but he did at least have a break from Jake and all his shenanigans. A forced one, mind you, as the god would still have preferred keeping an avatar dedicated to enjoying the livestream of his Chosen messing about.

Alas, for now, he was cut off due to the system event and decided to just take this mental break in strides. On this particular day, he was having a meeting with one of the many people who had come not to seek out the Order of the Malefic Viper but the Primordial himself.

An elven man in a pristine light blue robe with shoulder-length hair sat with a casual smile as he seemed to enjoy the tea-like concoction he had been offered, admiring the liquid. "Quite an interesting combination. How long did the withering of the Timeless Winterback Lotus Leaves take? And what method did you use to avoid melting them?"

"It seems counterintuitive, but the best way to wither the leaves without melting them is using extreme heat, activating the innate survival instincts of the lotus, making it use up all its own energy to try and survive, thus withering away. You do need to get the environment and temperature just right, though, and I will admit it took quite a bit of trial

and error,” Vilastromoz answered honestly. “Now, how goes the work on that odd crystalline cluster I heard you were working on?”

“Progress is slow and steady, but I do believe a demonstration will be possible should you choose to visit,” the elf answered.

“I might just have to stop by at some point,” Vilastromoz smiled before getting down to business. “We both know you didn’t just come here for pleasantries, though. What do you need?”

“As curt as ever, I guess some things never change no matter how many eras may pass,” the elf shook his head. “I am in need of a certain acid. I have all the ingredients, but the alchemists I have visited so far have looked full of despair before saying they could not do what I asked, while others outright called my commission impossible. Which is odd, considering you made me the same – albeit a less powerful – variant all the way back then.”

“What can I say? If you want the best, you come to the best. Show me what you need,” Vilastromoz said, holding out a hand as a crystal appeared in it. He quickly scanned the information in the crystal and nodded. “Yeah, I can see how this one can mess others up. It does look impossible at first look. Took me a while to make it possible back then.”

“I take it the expanded list of ingredients doesn’t pose an obstacle?”

“If you don’t count my increased commission cost as an obstacle, then no,” the snake god said in a teasing tone, knowing the elf wouldn’t care.

“Oh, It’ll be no problem. I’ll even help make the cores you want myself,” the elven man reassured the Viper. Something that was an actual reassurance.

Few – if any - in the multiverse could compare to the Autarch of the Altmar Empire when it came to magic engineering. It was often a discussion if he or Rigoria stood at the apex of magic engineering, which honestly was a useless endeavour as they both specialized in very different areas, even if they looked similar to an outsider.

With business concluded, they had some more time for recreational discussion as the two of them talked about some more unimportant issues until the Autarch brought up something that, while not interesting to Vilastromoz himself, did pertain to his Chosen... and a certain other Chosen.

“I was also informed through the grapevine by one of the noble family heads that your disciple has taken on a disciple of his own and even made her his Chosen?” the Autarch asked. “I wouldn’t have expected Duskleaf to do that, considering his disdain at people even suggesting it in the past. What’s more, I heard his disciple is a C-grade elf with an old connection to the Altmar Empire?”

“Not sure about the part where they have a connection to the Altmar Empire,” the Viper shook his head. “But yes, everything else is correct. Including the part where it’s weird that Duskleaf decided to take a Chosen.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, we simply looked into the clan of this... Meira, was it? From what we discovered, the clan she comes from was originally founded by an exiled member from a lesser noble house, so while the connection is minor, one does exist,” the Autarch insisted, Vilastromoz knowing what he was getting at.

“Without you even asking me, I’m sure the little elf will visit the Altmar Empire at some point,” the snake god said. “It isn’t really up to me, though. Mainly because I don’t care to get involved in any of that. If you want to convince anyone to accelerate the timeline of her visit, it’s either Duskleaf or my Chosen you should be talking to.”

“Oh yes, I nearly forgot. This elf was originally a slave of your Chosen, wasn’t she?” the Autarch said, no sense of animosity in his voice despite his hatred of people ever enslaving elves. Probably because, in the eyes of many, including his, becoming the slave of a Chosen didn’t even count but was viewed more as a fortuitous encounter.

“Yep, she was. And before you ask, dear Jake never wanted a slave of any kind. I just forced one on him as I thought it would be interesting and fun to put him in an awkward situation while also confronting him with a bit of how the multiverse worked, seeing as he’d just come here from his far too peaceful planet. He unsurprisingly didn’t like it and ended up freeing and uplifting her to where she is now. Not sure her becoming Duskleaf’s Chosen was ever in his plans, but I’m pretty sure he’s on board with it,” Vilastromoz said, remembering the good old times.

“I see... now, this may be a bit presumptuous to ask, but did their relationship evolve enough for her to potentially-“

“Nope, and if you hoped to recruit her to the Altmar Empire and potentially get a little bundle of Bloodline joy out of it, I wouldn’t count on that happening,” the Viper said, cutting off the elf and shaking his head. “In fact, I wouldn’t expect to-“

Just then, the Viper felt something. A faint echo, a memory awakening, and a connection formed that shouldn’t exist.

“What is it?” the Autarch asked, surprised. He looked like he had also faintly detected something amiss, an expert in reading the flow of Records and fate, but the elf wasn’t sure what he’d felt either.

Not that the snake god was either, as Vilastromoz frowned deeply as he did at least have a good idea of what had happened. “My Chosen just did something... something incredibly questionable.”

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Chapter 970: Bound To Happen

Calling what Jake had done a gamble was definitely an accurate description. He was messing with a concept no one really understood, not even someone like the Malefic Viper, making everything unpredictable. The only real question was how good his odds were that he would end up with something beneficial. Using Origin Energy tended to result in a good outcome for him... but this time, he quickly concluded something was off.

The string of Origin Energy entered the small snake and mushroom, representing the Palate of the Malefic Viper skill, and at first, Jake thought things were going well. The skill accepted the energy and responded to it.

He felt the two merge, and then... then everything no longer went as Jake had hoped.

A loud heartbeat made his entire Soulspace shake, and in return, a green pillar rose from the small snake and mushroom. It pierced toward the sky as Jake's arcane energy was scattered, and Jake stumbled back, feeling the pressure both inside his Soulspace and on his body outside.

Focusing, Jake lifted his hands to try and control the energy output, not panicking quite yet, but it kept growing. He spotted the shadowy version of himself representing Eternal Hunger back away before falling to the ground not far away, utterly suppressed, and from the floating drop of the Viper's blood, Jake felt almost a sense of glee as it began to react without Jake doing anything.

Refusing to give up, Jake poured in even more energy as he refused to see himself suppressed within his own Soulspace. Within his own damn world. Jake's heartbeat sent a wave of power through the entire Soulspace in response to Jake's conviction, his Bloodline refusing to surrender, and with this wave of absolute power and control, the green pillar seemed to stop growing and consuming his Soulspace...

And with it came the notification.

Due to your Bloodline, the skill [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] is evolving.

Jake smiled as he felt the pressure remain, but he believed that things would work out as another notification appeared... and right as it did, Jake's eyes went wide as a

sensation unlike anything he'd ever felt before washed over him, and from the depths of his Bloodline... uncertainty and powerlessness.

Skill Upgrad- ERROR: REQUIREMENTS NOT MET

Some skills related to the [ERROR] may be lost or changed

Warning! INSUFFICIENT [REDACTED]

The system messages flooded Jake's vision and mind as they kept coming, warning and error upon warning and error. For the first time, Jake wasn't sure what to do. The green pillar began expanding again, unstable as its power kept growing along with its Records. From the system messages, Jake was only sure of one thing: this was extremely fucking bad.

A sense of hollowness began to sneak into his body as his arcane energy in the sky flickered, and a headache struck his body. He tried one final time to rein in the pillar representing the Palate of the Malefic Viper skill, and as he did so, he finally understood what was happening. The Records of Palate were expanding endlessly... forcibly being upgraded. But in the process, everything else was being consumed, leaving nothing left. Not even the C-grade vessel not powerful enough to contain what the skill would eventually become.

With this realization, he also knew what he had to do. In this moment of desperation, clarity struck him, as his Bloodline fully backed him, and he was ready to mobilize every bit of Origin Energy he had... but not to get Palate under control.

There was no other choice.

He had to destroy the Records related to Palate of the Malefic Viper and the skill, no matter the consequences. It was that, or certain death... and not just for Jake.

The Fallen King was flying toward the Prima Vessel alongside Vesperia and Sylphie, the hawk speeding them up as a gust of wind carried them forward. The travel distance was annoying, but the Unique Lifeform saw no true cause for complaint. This entire part of the system event didn't strike him as particularly interesting in the first place in the first place. All they had to do was kill weak Prima Guardians that any of them could handle on their own. The only reason the Fallen King even stuck with Vesperia and Sylphie was because he believed it a waste to try and travel around pretending to be a hero on his own.

What fool would accept a Unique Lifeform traveling to their planet? Even more so than that, what cause did the Fallen King have to save a bunch of enlightened races? He cared not who won between the Guardian or the native enlightened. They were not his subjects, thus not his problem. Meanwhile, there was some value in having a True

Royal feel a closer sense of kinship and gratitude toward him. The source of this content is *novel~fire~net*

He had to make plans for the day he was no longer bound to the hunter, after all. Preserving the valuable connections he had formed through the Chosen only seemed like a logical approach until he finally managed to fully reclaim and restore his soul.

Just then, as he was flying, he felt something odd. For a fraction of a second, he believed it was the sensation of when Jake teleported the Fallen King to his side... but this wasn't it. This wasn't the Unique Lifeform being pulled toward Jake, but something coming toward the King.

Before he could even stop his flight, it hit him. Like a sledgehammer striking his soul, the Fallen King was forced to dedicate everything to defense. He faintly felt Vesperia and Sylphie stop as they noticed the Fallen King rapidly falling toward the ground as he stopped maintaining flight, golden cracks forming all over his mask.

All the Fallen King could do as he struggled with the invasion of his soul was to curse Jake for whatever he was doing, but even that, he did not have the mental power left over to do so.

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Eron watched the hunter closely as he kept healing him, battling the desolation trying to consume his body. Seeing the effects of desolation firsthand was an incredibly valuable experience and he did admittedly sometimes allow it to infect an area a bit longer than he had to before healing it, just to see what would happen. A minor crime he was confident his fellow Bloodline Patriarch wouldn't care about.

It wasn't like Eron could risk Jake dying. He needed him for his own goals to come to fruition. Taking any kind of permanent or even semi-permanent damage also wasn't an option, as Eron couldn't have Jake slow down too much or fail to continue evolving. As C-grades, Eron and Jake were both too weak to accomplish Eron's goals, so he needed the hunter to keep up with him at the very least.

Time passed, and Eron kept healing as a seemingly inexhaustible source of desolation kept releasing energy from inside Jake's soul and into his body. He didn't mind when he felt Jake move his energy or summon scales or anything like that. None of it disturbed him.

At least nothing had since suddenly, Eron felt something. It was as if a third presence appeared within the Prima Vessel, and as Eron stared at the flames that represented his soul... an ethereal second spark emerged before rapidly igniting, as Eron's vision was filled with green flames that seemed to consume everything, Eron included.

His eyes rotted away as Eron was forced to explode his own body to escape. He appeared again, stumbling back as he sought to restore his own damaged soul... but he refused to heal his eyes, as even without them, he felt it. The unmistakable presence of a god had appeared within the Vessel... and the soul of the hunter, which was the source, was crumbling under the pressure.

If it fell entirely... Eron did not even want to think what would be unleashed, but he doubted it was something the Prima Vessel would be able to contain for even a moment.

Royal Road is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

Gritting his teeth, Eron still reached out as he didn't stop healing Jake, as it wasn't only his soul that was being destroyed. He would have to keep preserving Jake's body, hoping the hunter could deal with... whatever was happening. It was clear this wasn't something intended or good, which only left Eron wondering:

What have you done?

Jake prepared to mobilize every bit of Origin Energy available as he acted decisively to empower his own Bloodline, giving him a chance to fight back. He knew this wasn't a situation he would walk away from whole, and the losses would be extraordinary and permanent... but nothing was less permanent than death.

His body within his Soulspace filled with energy as he reached out to-

"It was bound to happen at some point, wasn't it?"

The voice echoed throughout the Soulspace as Jake's body froze. Not only in surprise but due to the pressure that fell over him, making him utterly unable to act or move. Even the Origin Energy and his Bloodline fell utterly silent in front of the presence. The only thing that acted with glee was the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper that began to glow even brighter.

Jake looked up as the giant pillar that was consuming his Soulspace began to shrink until it formed a small snake that rapidly changed its form into the recognizable humanoid Jake had shared many beers with.

"Playing with Records and transcendent-level powers such as Bloodlines can bring out both fantastical and calamitous results," the Viper said as he slowly floated down and landed on the ground, with everything else within the entire Soulspace besides the Malefic Viper and his drop of blood seemingly frozen in time. **"This, Jake, is an example of the latter."**

The Viper slowly walked toward Jake as he observed everything around him. **"The idea was novel. To take a skill and infuse it with your Primeval Origins energy to try and get an upgrade. Perhaps you tried to just give it a little push in the right direction, eh? Well, here we are. This is the result."**

He stopped in front of Jake and sighed. **"I'm not saying it couldn't work. In fact, I would argue quite the opposite. It worked a bit too well. You are now well on your way to turn yourself into nothing but Palate of the Malefic Viper. Of course, there is no way a C-grade would be able to handle that, and seeing as you were effectively operating outside the system, I doubt it would have come to your rescue, either."**

Leaning in, the Viper flashed a smile as he raised a hand and flicked Jake's forehead, unfreezing him and making him tumble backward. **"You fucked up badly. Commendable attempt to minimize the damage, though. Empowering your Bloodline fully to try and destroy the Records of the skill could work, leaving you with either no skill at all or a fractured mess at best. Oh, and some pretty damn severe soul damage I wouldn't expect fixed before your next evolution."**

Jake, able to act again, propped himself up as he looked at the Malefic Viper standing within his Soulspace. "How are you-

"Oh, I'm not," the Viper grinned, no longer bothering to infuse his voice with power. "You are currently speaking to Palate of the Malefic Viper in all its glory. At least the form I chose to adopt once I became aware of what you were up to. I will say, it was quite lucky you did this experiment of yours on one of my skills. If you had done it on any other, you would be dead or had to carve the Records of the skill from your being."

Jake kept staring as the Viper kept explaining. "Palate is made from my Records. I am its Origin. Your little trick empowered it enough from a qualitative standpoint for me to appear as a representation of my Records within your Soulspace. Of course, under usual circumstances, I would not be aware I had appeared here with my true body, especially not with a system event going on. Oh, and I would be way less lucid and far more insistent on carrying out the task of devouring all your Records. But, well, you're not the only one with a capable Bloodline."

"Fuck me..." Jake just muttered as he allowed everything that had happened to sink in. "I did really fuck up catastrophically this time around, didn't I?"

"For sure," the Viper nodded as he turned serious and looked Jake in the eyes. "Jake, I'm not going to question your potential or talent. I don't think anyone can. But to put it bluntly, you're still pathetically weak. Your Bloodline may allow you to sometimes overcome the impossible, but that is only when it can have a fair fight of quality. In quantity, you are like a squirt gun trying to outfight an ocean-sized bucket in a competition of who can make the most people wet. Sure, your little squirt gun is damn

good at it and far more accurate and efficient, but what the fuck can it do in my stupidly contrived and abstract example? The answer is fuck-all."

Jake just kept quiet as the Viper continued.

"What's more, you chose to take on this fight without any system-backed method to refill your little squirt gun with water. So, what else did you expect to fill it up with? The Records required to fuel this entire shitshow would have to come from somewhere. Of course, pulling them directly from me in this instance wasn't an option, as that isn't how any of this works, so the system had to find the building blocks elsewhere. All on your unwilling dime."

"Yeah... I realize I overestimated myself and my Bloodline significantly and had no idea what I was doing at all," Jake confessed.

The pressure of the situation from the half-a-Planetary-Core filled with desolation - that was definitely still a problem, by the way - had made Jake not really think things through more than he should. At least that was one excuse... but in truth, Jake had just been stupidly overconfident and thought himself infallible.

"As I said, your Bloodline is strong, and the only reason Palate could even hope to evolve to the level where it would erase your existence is due to how overwhelming your Records already are. However, you need to understand that you are still growing. With your Bloodline, perhaps you could have won this bout and gotten rid of Palate of the Malefic Viper to save yourself, which is a testament to its power, but remember, all you would rid yourself of was a single one my skills trying to grow into the true Palate of the Malefic Viper. A process that was more than capable of consuming all that you are, your Bloodline, the only survivor, to be recycled by the system," the Malefic Viper said in a harsh tone.

"You're saying that...?" Jake muttered.

"Yes. Palate of the Me, as a singular Legacy skill, has more Records than your entire existence, and it's not even a close competition in the slightest. My mere existence here, capable of fully suppressing you within your own Soulspace, should be proof enough of that."

"Then... how in the hell could I have gotten rid of it?" Jake questioned.

"The same way you created the problem. This is just my theory, but I believe you empower and awaken aspects of your Bloodline whenever you apply your special energy to it, which would allow it to grow tremendously in Records to a level I cannot even begin to guess at. Just for a little while, but likely long enough to overwhelm and deal with Palate, saving your life," the Malefic Viper made his guess. One that did sound very probable and as good as any theory Jake had.

The two of them for silent for a few moments. Moments Jake wasn't sure they had with everything else going on, the desolation still a pressing issue. Plus, how long could the Viper stay manifested like this? All this definitely left him with one essential pressing issue.

"This might be too late to ask... but how do I fix it?" Jake asked after a bit. "What happens now?"

"Always the practical sort," Villy smiled. "The short answer is that you already know how to fix it. Pour some of that special Jake Juice into your Bloodline and get rid of me. Of course, that's the solution where you fix things yourself and don't ask your wonderful Patron to offer you his assistance."

"Not sure my own solution could even be considered a fix, as it includes breaking one of my best skills and fucking over my Path as an alchemist," Jake muttered.

"True that," Villy nodded before sighing. "I want you to know this doesn't come cheap to me either. The system tends not to like interference like this, but it's better than the alternative. Also, to clarify, everything I said today is just my own theories and gross oversimplifications of everything that happened, and there might be some minor hiccups. This shit is complicated and way above what you should be messing with, and it's even annoying for me to deal with."

"Thank you, my wonderful Patron," Jake said in a semi-joking tone, despite still feeling like shit with everything that was happening.

"You better thank me," the Viper said, his body flickering for a moment. "I can't maintain this form for long, so let me give you a quick explanation of what happens next. I'm going to fix what I can, but there will be some damage no matter what. You have lost a lot of Records already, all of which I will have to forcibly reclaim as you cannot handle them. When it comes to dealing with Palate of the Malefic Viper, I can see you have eaten quite an interesting object – something I'm not going to question anything about because I don't want the backlash I'll suffer after this shit to increase – but I will help you address it a little bit."

The form of the Viper began glowing as he seemed to be pulling in energy. "You fucked up Palate. I can't unfuck it. But I can stabilize and freeze it for now, but be fully aware this will have consequences. The internal stomach will be completely sealed and you can't take anything in or out of it. Moreover, upgrading Palate won't be an option either due to its fragmented Records. I'll look for a solution to this, but in the meantime, just be happy these are the only consequences... besides the severe soul damage you have already suffered, that is."

Jake could only nod, as this was way fucking better than Jake just ripping the skill from his soul entirely.

The Viper smiled and shook his head. "Let's hope this becomes a teaching moment... but not a too important one. Your reckless experimentation and willingness to do the moronic is also one of your greatest strengths. Just maybe think it through a tad more next time. Now, let me get to work. Oh, and Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"This is gonna hurt. Like... a lot."

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Chapter 971: The Cost of Saving A Friend

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WARNING!

[REDACTED]

WARNING!

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

...

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

“There. Patched you up best anyone in the damn multiverse could. Even went a bit above and beyond and was nice enough to preserve that broken half of a Planetary Core you had in there. Despite sealing the stomach, you should still benefit from that thing, at least, though really fucking slowly. The good news is, you have a potentially infinite amount of time to fully absorb it because you sure

as hell can't take anything in and out with how it is now. As for the rest of the effects of Palate, they should stay the same. Oh, and for the soul damage, that's up to you to deal with; I think I've done enough," the Viper said, his form already beginning to fade away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Viper had used a Transcendent skill.

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

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

Fuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Status

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

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

Stamina: 9203/185,041 (222,170) New novel chapters are published on [novel~fire~net](#)

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

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

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

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

“Will it heal on its own?”

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

Eron took a moment as he looked deeply at Jake, staring at something clearly only he could see before answering. “Yes. The fashion in which your soul was damaged is

frighteningly controlled. As if your soul was a sculpture smashed into a million pieces, then put together perfectly once more. Of course, putting the sculpture together does not make it whole. Only time will be the glue that fully fuses everything back together.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The point was no one would ever use their Transcendent skills lightly due to the associated cost that went far above just spending some mana or stamina. It was a significant moment when it was used, especially by a Primordial, where any kind of

even semi-permanent loss was massive. Even those that weren't as bad as the fully permanent ones would often take innumerable years to make up for and would set you back significantly... especially because there would always be a cost in Records when using one, no matter what.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The end result?

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

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

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Chapter 972: Doctor's Orders

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

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

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

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

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

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

kind of external support. The most complete recovery is the one your body will naturally have.”

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

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

... so that was definitely a no.

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

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

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

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

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

“A wise woman,” Eron nodded in approval.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So how do you wanna deal with this situation?" Miranda asked in a serious tone.

"People will notice your absence. Especially Ell'Hakan's goons, who seem to have been tracking you and where you went. We can, of course, do nothing, but that may only lead to speculation... and it isn't like the actual truth will do us any good."

"I'm more worried about how this will impact the system event," Jake shook his head.

"We were competing pretty well with Ell'Hakan and the expansion of his alliance..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I shall fly as fast as I ca-“

“Not fast enough,” Vesperia said in a cold tone.

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

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

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

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

“Will you...?”

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

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

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

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Chapter 973: A Tough Job To Do

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

To do nothing.

He was not good at doing nothing.

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

Nope.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Status

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ree?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ree?" Sylphie, who had really snuggled herself into Jake's lap, asked. For more chapters visit *novel*fire*net*

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

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

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

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

"I don't believe that is necessary," Vesperia argued against Sylphie's argument.

"Ree."

"Hm..."

"Ree."

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

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

"Then that's settled," Vesperia said in a satisfied tone.

"Say... wasn't the Fallen King with you two?" Jake changed the topic once bodyguard duties were established.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sylphie also wasn't the best at doing nothing, and Jake feared that her finding ways to entertain herself would lead to something Miranda would complain about, so he needed some other ways to keep them entertained, at least until Sylphie left. Vesperia could easily keep herself busy working on Hive Queen stuff and her internal world. This left him with something hugely impactful to consider, with potentially the safety of Haven itself at risk:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“More than the circle?” Arnold inquired further.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 974: Not A Good Start

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vesperia, on the other hand, turned out to be a big fan of chess. Chess was also one of the few games where Jake didn't really have any advantages at all due to his Bloodline. His intuition didn't seem to do much, and as there was no danger, but it was all just play, most of his senses didn't seem to care much about what was happening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because it was playtime with his little puzzle box!

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

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level. Levels completed: (289/10000).

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

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

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

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

Time to get to work!

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 975: An Old Man's Measured Approach

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

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

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

An army for show.

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

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

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

A slave army? Internal discord between variants? New NOVEL chapters are published on [novel•fire•net](http://novel.fire.net)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unfortunate but not unexpected.

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

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

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

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

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

"I know the Third King, as he calls himself, is listening, so allow me to offer a warning. I have come to kill the Prima Guardian, and I will not leave before that is done. I

genuinely wish to do this under peaceful circumstances without unnecessary bloodshed, but should you continually impede my goal, know that forcing my hand will only give victory to the other Kings," Miyamoto spoke, looking at all the clearly nervous C-grades confronting him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 976: Setting People Straight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What I say next is not to sow discord, but that you know is important. All three of you privately proposed to me that I could help slay the two others, and they would commit to a quite favorable alliance," he continued, the three of them throwing angry glances at one another but still shut up. "I rejected them all... but others would gladly take such an offer. I also want you to consider something. What happens if a major faction comes from another planet, takes advantage of your struggle, and offers an alliance, effectively making you servants? Would you reject, or would the desperation from fighting a losing conflict push you to make an unwise choice? I believe that if the status quo is maintained, the answer is clear."

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

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

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

The three Beastkin Kings had managed to obtain their statuses not only due to their personal power but also their respective prowess' as leaders. The Sword Saint wasn't keen on how they had handled things so far, but he believed them all competent

enough to understand the importance of avoiding an internal conflict when there were so many external threats on the horizon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Distinguished Prima Guardian – lvl 294]

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

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

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

"Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut."

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

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

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

"Thank you for allowing me to accomplish the task I came to do," the Sword Saint said with a smile and a nod. "Now, if you would accompany me into the Prima Vessel, I wish to see if I can use it to return to my planet. If not, the blueprint for a teleportation circle allowing not just you to teleport to other planets, but for other planets to travel here should have become available." New novel chapters are published on
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His words made the Kings exit their stupor as the World Leader and other Kings accompanied the Sword Saint into the Prima Vessel, wherein they quickly confirmed that the Sword Saint could use it to return to Earth, so that was fortunate. What should not have come as a surprise was the instant question from the Kings if they could send some people back to Earth with him, something Miyamoto naturally agreed to. Only three total, though. He wouldn't want to needlessly overwhelm Miranda, knowing she was already incredibly busy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bertram.

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

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

Jacob remained silent as Ell'Hakan kept speaking.

"Exactly how do you envision this going for the Holy Church if the Order of the Malefic Viper is allowed to run wild? The Church wants to control the galaxy, something I'm

more than fine with, but will your old coworker agree with such a thing? Or will he put up a fight till the bitter end, killing countless in service of his own pride and stubbornness?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Which only makes you all the more frustrating. Either way, just do the job you came here to do and direct the strike team where they are most needed," Ell'Hakan said as he walked off, but he stopped just before he entered the building from the balcony. "If you truly want peace and to avoid needless conflict as you keep preaching, make the Chosen of the Malefic Viper make the right choice. Do so I no longer have to refer to him with that label at all. I will never be a friend of his, but his current Path requires one of us to die unless something significant changes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 977: A Good Faction & Developing Situation

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

"I do wonder what the response of the major factions shall be," Vesperia agreed, though she didn't look overly concerned. Likely because the few planets she cared about had already destroyed every teleportation circle they had, stopping anyone from going to or from the planet. The members of the Endless Empire living there would then simply get in contact with the faction through their divine connection after the system event was over and work from there without having to interact with the rest of the event.

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

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

capable of destroying planets wasn't the best to have in your local galaxy, but because of what this meant.

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

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

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

Status

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vesperia scoffed and shook her head. "I find the comparison ridiculous. Drones die for the hive. All are willing to die for the hive if that's what's required to ensure its survival. That is their purpose. Members of the Holy Church do not die because it's their duty.

They only give their lives in the first place because they know that is not their true end, making it not a true sacrifice either. It's ridiculous that they need it, but without the Holyland, the entire Holy Church would not be able to function as it is. Also, there is a good reason those who give their lives are hailed as martyrs and heroes after their deaths, despite how meaningless their sacrifices ultimately are. It all comes back to ego... an innate desire to be praised and recognized despite insignificant contributions. They see others hailed and believe that dying such a "noble" death would be worth it, with the only real consequence relaxation for the rest of their soul's lifespan."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Indeed, they are all fully reborn but are still growing in power. Shouldn't be long before-"
"The rightful source is *novel·fire·net*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Reports that Ell'Hakan seems to be aware you haven't been on the move recently, and we believe he may soon try something... as for what that something entails, we have no idea as of now, but it sounded ominous," Miranda said. "I don't think he will directly attack Earth again, but... anyone currently fighting out there are potential targets."

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

Man... fuck this soul damage.

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Chapter 978: Unsettling Whispers

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

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

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

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

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

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

To clarify, the Fallen King had no idea if what he said was true. What he did know was that negotiating as a monster was overly tiring, as enlightened simply never trusted him, at least not those in a newly integrated universe. There were naturally some exceptions

and even a planet with beastfolk where Sylphie easily convinced them as they worshipped her almost like a deity due to the power of her variant race.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now, let us fulfill our promise and leave. Oh, and allow me to offer some free advice. Now that you are considered part of the Prima Guardian Alliance, you can also have people teleport to or from here to help you clean up the remaining regular Primas. Of course, you will need to establish the teleportation circle that should have been provided to you when you unlocked the Prima Vessel," the Fallen King said, deciding to be a bit helpful, as the witch back in Haven had many times told him to at least not make other World Leaders too fearful.

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

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

“Thank you for allowing me to realize my fate.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes, he hated the inconsistency of his intuition. There were times it was very clear, while in other instances, it just gave him super vague feelings. On this day, all it

told him was that something was wrong and that someone could potentially be in danger...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake kept quiet as William took over.

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

"That isn't anything new, is it?" Jake questioned. A lot of people wanted him dead, right? Ell'Hakan and all his goons, other minor gods he had potentially pissed off in the early

days of the integration, and probably a lot he didn't even know about, including those who held some kind of resentment toward the Viper, his abilities to manipulate Primeval Origins, or just those envious of his Nevermore placement. So many damn suspects.

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

"Why woul-"

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

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

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

--

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

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

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

"You feel it, too?"

"Ree..." the hawk gave off a small screech.

Something unsettling was coming. The Fallen King focused on improving his ability to view into the distance, which was when he saw it. Something was happening with the energy in the horizon. It was being disturbed somehow, and as the King threw a

questioning mental probe at the hawk with actual eyes and way better vision, her answer was only more unsettling.

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

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Chapter 979: A Perplexing Creature

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

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

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

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

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

[Desolate Child of Loss – lvi 306]

Its level was higher than expected and put pressure on the Fallen King, especially because he couldn’t get a full reading on just how powerful this foe was. Sylphie had

also identified the approaching creature and was ready to act at a moment's notice, showing the same level of uncertainty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If we only see each other now, then you are being used. Exploited. We do not wish to be your enemy," the Fallen King said. Even if they had to one day fight this creature, now wasn't a good time.

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

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

The Desolate Child of Loss tilted its head at the King’s words and responded. ***“No. How could? I am... I.”*** The link to the origin of this information rests in *novel·fire·net*

It was an answer that made no sense, making the Fallen King try again. ***“Have you met him? Ell’Hakan?”***

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

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

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

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

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

“We are not your enemies, no, and you are not ours either, so let us part now on good terms and meet again in the future,” the Fallen King said, trying to find a way to sound sympathetic while also still insisting on leaving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Desolate Child of Loss kept simply walking forward, not in the mood to speak anymore as it gradually sped up. The Fallen King was confused as to how until he noticed... the very concept of space was breaking down in front of the creature. It wasn’t getting faster; what stopped it from going fast was simply disappearing.

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

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

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

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

“This... okay. Just rest. Go home. Ascend.”

The Fallen King wanted to answer but didn’t get the chance as the creature shot upwards straight at him, more energy than before revolving around it. The only colors that could be seen were the faint golden energy embedded in the King’s barrier, but

when it met the charging Desolate Child of Loss, it faded entirely, and the Fallen King could only try to blast his opponent away again.

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

Instantly, the Fallen King knew the danger.

His body exploded as his boosting skill fully activated, the monochrome temporarily pushed away by a golden wave as he unleashed his power. Raising both hands, a golden beam was released, striking the Desolate Child of Loss head-on and blasting it into the distance as the King lowered his hands and assessed the damage.

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

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

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

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

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

"You fight. Should not."

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

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

They did have one big advantage, though.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet with every attack they landed, the desolation in their surroundings only intensified, and eventually, the Fallen King and Sylphie were forced to retreat away from the Desolate Child of Loss as the strain got too bad. It was as if the creature was a bag of

poison gas with a bit of it released every time they struck it, but luckily, this domain didn't seem to follow the creature as it quickly gave chase.

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

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Chapter 980: Durability Test

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vesperia looked like she wanted to comment but ended up just nodding. Miranda seemed done sending messages and looked at Jake. "Head to the teleporter now."

Sandy and Arnold will be waiting there, and I also got a message Eron agreed to help and is heading there, as he also wants to observe this creature of desolation more closely. And, no matter what you say, do be careful. The Fallen King and Sylphie are both powerful in their own rights, and we're not even sure they need anything more than a lift back to Earth."

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

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

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

"How about you come along with Sandy and me to check out this creature yourself? Then maybe you can get a better understanding of any links to Ell'Hakan or other enemies it might have," Jake offered, in part to keep an eye on the guy and in part because he *really* wanted to know if Ell'Hakan was actually involved. The guy hadn't made any outright hostile moves in a while, and with the Fangs of Man theater Jake pulled off, this timing was very odd if Ell'Hakan was the schemer who'd planned it.

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

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

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

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

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

They were losing despite how everything looked.

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

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

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

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

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

If a wound infected with the concept of desolation was left long enough, it would also make the Soulshape desolate until it passed a certain threshold of no return, at which

point the damage would be semi-permanent, only fixable by evolution or someone extremely powerful interfering. Someone capable of fully eliminating the concept of desolation and reshaping the soul of the injured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let us see exactly how durable this creature is... if nothing else, it should buy us time to retreat," the Fallen King said. Sylphie didn't take long to agree. If they dragged things

out longer, it would become too risky to try anything as they wouldn't have enough resources available if they had to retreat afterward, so now was the best time to strike.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not that he wished to see himself outdone. Chapters first released on
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The skin and flesh were getting torn off the Desolate Child of Loss as it was unable to move while getting blasted into the ground, allowing the Fallen King to hold nothing back.

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

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

kept striking, every hit a Golden Claw that could usually instantly kill even monsters higher level than himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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. this chapter is updated by novel-fire.net

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.

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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. Follow current novels on **novel•fire•met**

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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.

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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. Google search **novel■fire■net**

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.

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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. This chapter is updated by novel**fire**net

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.

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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..." New novel chapters are published on [novel♦fire♦net](#)

"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.

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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. For original chapters go to [novel★fire★net](#)

"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?"

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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 Ell'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. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT NOVEL•

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 Ell’Hakan and the Holy Church had begun to deploy in the last month or so. As the number of planets remaining dwindled, Ell’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 ectognamorph 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.

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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." For more chapters visit *novel·fire·net*

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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?"

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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. R

"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 Ell'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 Ell'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. Follow current novels on *novel•fire•net*

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.

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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. This text is hosted at *novel*fire*net*

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.

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Chapter 991: An Impetus of Possibilities

The closer Jake got to completion, the harder it felt and the more nervous he became as he questioned if he'd gone about this the right way. The external time pressure of the final Prima Guardian being slain and the potential of communication opening up with the wider multiverse didn't help either, but Jake knew he couldn't let it impact him too much. He simply resigned himself to the fact he wouldn't be done with his project in time...

And then a day passed. No news of the final Guardian being slain or any system messages appearing.

A second day went by. Nothing.

Followed by a third, a fourth, and soon, an entire week had passed by, at which point Jake no longer felt grateful he had some extra time but pure confusion about what the hell was going on. Enough to contact Miranda directly to ask if she had somehow

missed telling him there were no red planets left. However, the response she sent made it clear she also wasn't sure what was going on.

"I know it's odd, and I'm doing what I can to figure out what is happening. So far, all we know is that the final planet is one firmly under the control of Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church, and honestly, one we expected to have had their Guardian killed far sooner. It took some effort, but we managed to locate a family who had once been living on this planet before the Prima Guardian event and had left because the Holy Church fully took over, and from the sounds of it, the planet is far from weak. It's really odd that they didn't join the Prima Guardian Alliance, though, even if they were powerful enough to deal with the system event alone. While I still can't be sure yet, putting all this together, we can only conclude that they're purposefully delaying killing the Prima Guardian for some reason. As for what this reason is... who knows? One would think the Church was also keen on reestablishing contact with their Patrons, but apparently, they want to get something done before that can happen."

To summarize, some kind of scheme was going on. Jake genuinely had no clue why they were delaying like this, especially considering there was a chance some kind of reward existed based on how quickly the Milky Way finished dealing with the entire event. The Church and Ell'Hakan were, in essence, grieving the entire galaxy by refusing to kill the last boss to the benefit of everyone.

Maybe they wanted Jake or someone else to travel there to finish the event, only for it to be a trap? Or were they waiting to fully stabilize their power? Some internal conflict? There were so many possibilities that Jake didn't even want to think about it but just kept focusing solely on his arrow.

There really was no need to stress about the outside world when he already had such a big stressor right there with him.

He felt like someone who'd been building the world's largest house of cards and was now placing the last few dozen cards. With every touch, he feared the entire thing would come falling down, even if he knew that wasn't really a possibility before he activated when. When Jake realized he only had about a day or two left of intense work, he contacted Miranda and told her not to contact him or allow anyone else to bother him until he was done. This final part would take absolute focus throughout.

Jake even went so far as to drink some of the soul-soothing dew water he'd used while healing to calm his nerves to ensure he could do the last touches properly. By now, only the top of the large arrow tip had to be covered with the rest of the formation. From there, Jake only had to make some finishing touches, and it was go-time.

Hours passed as Jake's careful hand continued crafting the arrow. He connected the magic circles, drew the runes perfectly, and put it all in an interconnected web that should hopefully be powerful enough to merge with Eternal Hunger without instantly being overwhelmed and consumed.

For the first time in a long time, Jake was sweating as he willed the final bit of arcane energy to cover the tip of Eternal Hunger's form. He added the required layers on top after that, double and triple-checking everything was according to how he wanted it. With a small nod, Jake lifted his hands away from the arrow that was now complete...

... alright, one more check-over to ensure nothing was out of place was definitely in order. And a good thing he did, as Jake spotted a flaw which was quickly rectified. He ended up spending nearly five hours just staring intently at the arrow from top to bottom before he felt satisfied and stepped back, having seen nothing obvious out of place.

Jake looked at the more than two-meter tall arrows-shaped Eternal Hunger and the translucent formation that covered it. It looked kind of bad, honestly, with the formation turning the arrow too bulky to look usable. It was as if Eternal Hunger was trapped in a crystal prison one was meant to break it out from, and the thing definitely wasn't shootable like this.

Luckily, this wasn't the arrow's final form... because he still had the last step left to go. Jake didn't have enough surface area to make the intricate runes and scripts he needed, which was why he added so many layers to give him space to inscribe, but naturally, this did result in the arrow becoming a bit too bulky.

So, the final step would be to remove those layers by combining them into one single-layered shell that would encompass and cover Eternal Arrow from top to bottom and merge with the mythical weapon. By far, this was the most crucial step, and Jake already half-expected something to go wrong.

If it did end up going horrendously, he had a few backup plans and was quite frankly fully willing to even pull out a bit of his Origin Energy if he believed it would help at some point. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary and that the innate concepts of his arcane energy and its ability to change would be enough to accomplish his goal, but this was unexplored territory... and let's be honest, something usually went wrong when Jake did things like this, and he had to do some hail mary to miraculously save everything.

Anyway, the primary goal of the formation was to empower the concepts of the Protean Arrow and his arcane energy which was core to the skill. For something to be Protean meant it was able to easily change. That it was versatile and adaptable. If that versatility was pushed to the extreme, then maybe, just maybe, it would be enough to even adapt to Eternal Hunger.

With a final look at the arrow, Jake decided to stop stalling and get on with it. Firstly, he dismissed the barrier all around him that had been stabilizing the space. This allowed mana to rush in and fill the room, putting him on a timer before it had any way to affect the in-progress arrow. Next, he reached out with his right hand and grasped hold right at the center of the arrow, where magic circles had been drawn for him to hold. ¶

Here goes nothing.

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Jake's body exploded with energy as he activated his boosting skill fully. With it active, he would have far less control over what was about to happen, but right now, he didn't need control but pure power. Potent arcane energy rushed through Jake's body as it entered the crystalline structure and spread all throughout it as the room lit up in the color of his arcane mana.

All he could do was trust he hadn't fucked anything up as the first crack sounded out. The outermost layer of the formation collapsed in upon the layer right beneath it, merging the two together in an instant using the arcane strings Jake had placed to function as bridges.

The entire structure seemed to be shaking as they were forcefully merged, with hundreds of small reactions happening every second, and Jake did nothing but infuse his intent and energy. He didn't try to manually control anything at all but believed that everything should fall into its right place... assuming he hadn't fucked anything up.

Another loud crack sounded as the two merged layers collapsed once more, colliding and merging with the one beneath it. The intensity of energy grew as all the arcane mana Jake had infused into the arrow over the last weeks was released, bringing more and more parts of the formation to life.

Shortly, another layer collapsed. One by one they all cracked and merged, the formation becoming more and more complex. Jake, despite his insane resistance to his own affinity and mana, felt his hand begin to burn with the insane amount of energy at play, as most of it was completely wasted and dispersed into the air or tried to enter Jake.

He didn't care about the utter inefficiency of his work, but only that so far, nothing had broken yet. However, he was about to reach the most crucial stage. On Eternal Hunger itself, Jake had placed several runes that were there to merge the formation and the arrow-shaped mythical weapon that the system refused to recognize as an arrow. When the final layer collapsed and fell upon these runes, it was make it or break it if all of Jake's preparations had been good enough, or all he had accomplished was to feed Eternal Hunger a buttload of arcane mana that, in truth, wouldn't benefit it jack-shit due to their connection anyway.

Finally, all the layers of the formation had merged, and so far, Jake was admittedly astonished nothing had gone too wrong yet. Sure, the last part was the hardest, but so far so good. He didn't exactly have the choice of stopping what he was doing either, but he just had to believe in his own skills and let his will guide the grand finale.

With a rush of intent, Jake sped up the last collapse. The many-layered formation that made up the shell covering Eternal Hunger was crushed into the weapon itself, as all the runes Jake had inscribed upon it came to life as they switched from being made of pure, stable mana to being fully active.

In an instant, the color of the room changed. The arcane affinity turned from the usual pinkish-purple to an incredibly deep purple as curse energy was released and mixed with it. Jake felt Eternal Hunger come to life as it began to greedily absorb the vast amounts of mana actively being pushed onto its form, the formation shell duking it out with the weapon.

Gritting his teeth, Jake continued doing nothing but hoping that things would work out. Cracks sounded out constantly, and shards of crystalized arcane energy fell on the ground, as the grand formation seemed to lose some of its prior thickness as more and more of its energy was drained.

Yet the integrity of the formation held. Rather than being broken, it was absorbed as the runes on Eternal Hunger continually grew in power. At this point, even with Jake's incredibly high Perception, he wasn't capable of keeping track of all the reactions going on between the formation and Eternal Hunger. This was many weeks of work and months of preparation leading to barely a couple of minutes of reactions all at once, with most of them happening now.

Jake was only waiting for the shoe to drop. For something to go wrong and his instinct to scream at him. For what he'd missed to reveal itself and force him to scramble to do a last-minute fix that would hopefully save everything... but it just didn't happen.

Seconds ticked by, and the reaction just continued. Jake stood there, tense as could be, as the arcane and cursed light began to slowly fade. The energy within the room began to rapidly disperse until, finally, the room went still. No more reactions, no more energy released.

Jake stared at Eternal Hunger and its slight change. Official source is *novel●fire●net*

Nothing looked like it had changed besides a deep purple – almost black – layer of crystalline arcane mana now covering the entire form of Eternal Hunger. It was not even a millimeter thick and just looked like a thick coat of paint... but Jake, who still had a hand on the arrow, smiled as he felt it.

As of this moment, he was no longer holding a weird arrow-shaped spear in his hand... he was holding an actual arrow, even in the eyes of the system.

With a big grin, Jake finally opened his system notifications and saw it.

Skill Upgraded: [Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)] --> [Protean Arrow of Eternal Horizons (Legendary)]

He didn't delay and instantly checked the new description, and... hot damn was it long.

[Protean Arrow of Eternal Horizons (Legendary)] – Manifest your will as you forge an arrow to encompass all possibilities. Grants the skill to design and summon

two types of extremely powerful arrows to strike down a targeted foe (only one arrow can be summoned at a time). Two versions of arrows can be created: one of pure energy and the other using a medium known as Impetus Arrows. Energy Arrows may be infused with several layers of energy dependent on the Hunter's will. Impetus Arrows requires a powerful medium to direct the nature of the summoned arrow. Creating Impetus Arrows requires a significant amount of time, focus, and manual input, while Energy Arrows can be summoned relatively quickly and with far less effort. The Hunter may envision his foe and channel his Willpower into the creation process to further empower the final creation. The arrow summoned deals significantly increased damage to the envisioned target, dependent on Willpower and your familiarity with the target. Damage increased further based on level disparity, Perception, and distance traveled. Due to the Hunter's powerful connection to the arrow, he can influence its flight path, and all effects can be further increased dependent on the Hunter's connection to the medium used to create an Impetus Arrow. Stat bonuses are applied depending on the nature of the summoned arrow. May the horizon of possibilities remain eternal, as no foe proves themselves too powerful to slay; you've simply yet to create the arrow capable.

Summarizing the changes to the skill seemed complicated, but it really wasn't. All that had changed was that Jake could now create another type of Protean Arrow using a medium, and the system had decided to call these arrows Impetus Arrows. Perhaps because all turning a medium into a Protean Arrow really did was empower it and allow the medium to become a "perfect" arrow infused with the concept of the skill.

Of course, the details were a bit more complicated, and Jake only saw more possibilities for the skill in the future. However, for now, he was more than satisfied as he couldn't help grinning. Not just because of the massive upgrade he'd just gotten, but the circumstances under which it had happened.

This felt like one of the first times nothing had gone terribly wrong during something like this. Shit had just worked the way Jake had wanted it to, and his preparations had proven sufficient. After the utter failure that was his attempt to forcefully upgrade Palate of the Malefic Viper, this felt like a massive win, and perhaps what had happened then had influenced his success this time around. It had made him extra careful and considerate to ensure nothing went wrong, as to not replicate what happened then... even if it couldn't have been as bad no matter what, seeing as Jake wasn't fucking around inside his own Soulspace.

Still feeling in a good mood, Jake kept reading over the description time and time again, as he still just stood there holding Eternal Hunger with his bloody hand that had been nearly burned away by the intense energies it had been subjected to.

However, that's when he noticed something... he'd gotten notifications about the skill upgrade and the new skill description, but due to its sheer length, he had missed this wasn't the only message he'd received. Due to his hyperfocus, he hadn't even noticed

it... but during the final parts of the upgrading process, another system message arrived:

The last Prima Guardian had finally been slain.

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Chapter 992: Administrator's Seal of the Exalted Prima

Jake's feeling that communication would open up for the Milky Way Galaxy hadn't been entirely based on his guts. Sure, it had been ninety percent just a feeling, but the reason others had entertained the idea was because it seemed probable with the other aspects of the event taken into account.

Clearly, the system differentiated between galaxies and their performances. Each galaxy did its own event, and as per the system message received before the Prima Guardians arrived on their respective planets, rewards would be given once the final Prima Guardian was slain:

"All rewards from this event shall be given once all Prima Guardians of the Milky Way Galaxy have been slain or at the event's natural expiration in five years. Rewards are based both on the performance of every individual and the planet's performance as a whole."

The wording also made it sound like the event would expire when the final Prima Guardian was slain, and if the event was over, why would communication remain jammed? All-in-all, there had been good reason to believe Jake had been correct.

Anyway... Jake was happy with his newly upgraded arrow and quickly put Eternal Hunger away with its new shiny coat of Protean Arrow goodness. The entire thing was perfectly stable after his success, and Jake wasn't in a rush to use the arrow, as the coat should remain stable for at least a few years if he put it away and didn't expose it to environmental mana.

To be clear, it was still only one arrow. The Protean Arrow enhancement would only last for a single shot and then Eternal Hunger would be back to just being Eternal Hunger and no longer an arrow in the eyes of the system. Hopefully, that single attack would be enough to kill most things, and even if it wasn't, it was sure to deal tremendous damage.

But all good things in time. For now, Jake had some system messages to attend to, and after that, he had to check in with Miranda, talk to Villy, and figure out what had been

going on over the last day or so while Jake was busily hyper-focusing on upgrading his Protean Arrow skill.

Opening the system messages he'd received, Jake saw it was a long one and got to reading.

The final Prima Guardian of the Milky Way Galaxy has fallen, and with it, the Exalted Prima's assessment of your galaxy is complete.

Through their combined efforts, the Milky Way Galaxy is the first galaxy to slay every Prima Guardian, laying claim to their planets or losing them to the other native beasts of their homeworlds. The Exalted Prima has recognized and rewarded this achievement by naming the Seat of the Exalted Prima within the Milky Way Galaxy the top-ranked Seat of the universe. Records of this recognition permeate the galaxy and all those who hail from there. Be proud of what you have accomplished.

With the event concluded, certain restrictions placed upon the Milky Way Galaxy have been lifted; however, for the duration of the other galaxies of the universe doing their respective events, none can leave the galaxy, and communication within the universe shall remain fully restricted.

Due to their performances in this event, certain individuals have been granted additional rewards based on their contribution to the event and the number of Primas and Prima Guardians they have slain. Additional rewards have been granted to all Administrator Candidates based on their ranking. Due to the performance of the Milky Way Galaxy during the Prima Guardian event, the top five Administrator Candidates have been promoted to Seat of the Exalted Prima Administrators, granting them certain privileges once visiting the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Based on their rankings, their respective authorities differ.

There was a lot to unpack, but it was good to see their galaxy had indeed been the first in the universe to finish their event. Moreover, it seemed that the reward for this wasn't something tangible but instead what Jake would call a galaxy-wide "buff" of sorts to Records. It should make it easier for everyone to keep getting levels and progressing... it wasn't all good, though, dependent on where you were coming from.

This only further increased the value of the Milky Way Galaxy. There were already many with machinations on claiming the galaxy, and now they had just been further motivated. Moreover, the Seat of the Exalted Prima in the galaxy had also been improved, meaning claiming the galaxy would likely even help you take control of a World Wonder, something every single top faction would be highly interested in.

Things really weren't going to end peacefully... but all that was a problem for later. Probably something he would have to think and talk about later that day, but still a little later.

The message also finally confirmed that some level of communication was indeed back on the table, though it was definitely still limited. No one could help other galaxies or contact them until they were done dealing with their own events, and traveling to other universes was also still out of the question. But it did sound like one could talk with those in other universes, and just being able to contact Villy was enough for what was to come, and the continued lockdown was only good for Jake and his plans.

Finally, the message ended with the top five Administrator Candidates being promoted to full-on Administrators, putting them one step closer to claiming the Seat of the Exalted Prima within the Milky Way as their own. Clearly, it was still a competition of who would ultimately claim it, seeing as there were five who got promoted.

As for who got the promotions... well, if it had been right after Jake had slain his first Prima Guardian, it would have been him at the forefront. Back then, he had the top spot, with Ell'Hakan second and what he now knew was the Desolate Child of Loss right beneath him. However, over the last months, things had changed.

Administrator Candidates promoted to Seat of the Exalted Prima Administrators:

1: Ell'Hakan

2: Jake Thayne

3: Servant of the Holy Church

4: King Iludar

5: Voice of the One

In addition to these five being promoted, all other rewards have been granted accordingly. Other Administrator Candidates have been rewarded and given opportunities for promotion.

Jake didn't particularly care about the last part, but the five people promoted were definitely of note... especially seeing as Jake had dropped down to the second spot. Actually, the mere fact Jake remained in second place was a testament to the power of the Prima Guardian Earth had faced and the faction Jake had ended up creating. Especially when one also considered the Voice of the One – Kindroth – was on the list.

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Miranda wasn't on the list because she was essentially an extension of Jake and not a World Leader. Ell'Hakan was there and had the top spot because he was the leader of the biggest coalition, while the Servant of the Holy Church was obviously from the Holy Church. On that note, calling themselves a Servant was obviously just some bullshit PR

strategy to appear more humble and something the Holy Church loved doing way too much, which was also why they tended to not use names but only titles, even on places like the Nevermore Leaderboards.

As for King Iludar, Jake remembered Miranda mentioning he was one of the close aides of Ell'Hakan and the leader of a coalition that had joined him and the Holy Church. It wouldn't be wrong to say he was Ell'Hakan's Kindroth in that he was someone not directly connected to any of the largest factions of the multiverse but had chosen to align himself with them anyway and had reached his high position due to competence.

Jake didn't really have much else to say about this list. If he hadn't been a moron and gotten himself injured, he would likely have been able to take the top spot, as while Ell'Hakan did lead the top alliance in the Milky Way, he did so with many helpers who were bound to also show up on the list of Administrator Candidates. Meanwhile, Jake had a lot of people who weren't candidates, meaning their contributions would mostly be attributed to him. Well, he and Kindroth, based on how the Voice of the One had done pretty damn well and earned himself a promotion.

Seeing Ell'Hakan with his name ranked higher on a list than Jake's did feel bad, but it wasn't anything he stressed over. Maybe the other Chosen got better rewards, and he did have an advantage when it came to ultimately claiming the Seat of the Exalted Prima, but if all went well, none of that would soon matter. Besides, it wasn't as if Jake didn't get any rewards.

He hadn't noticed it, primarily because he hadn't been using the ring, seeing as it hadn't given any stats before, but now, the Seal of the Exalted Prima Jake had been rewarded after gaining access to the Prima Vessel was no longer just a useless decoration that only allowed teleportation. No, it had been thoroughly upgraded, and it was definitely time for Jake to change out one of his rings... because this was a good one.

[Administrator's Seal of the Exalted Prima (Mythical)] – Proof that you are an Administrator of the Seat of the Exalted Prima and on your way to laying claim to a World Wonder. This item has been touched by the Exalted Prima, granting it potent abilities of adaption. This allows you to mimic a part of the Exalted Prima Guardian's powers, giving you adaptable stats. These stats will apply dependent on your situation and your actions. These stats can exceed the stat cap provided by equipment by up to 5% or 2880 stats, whichever is lowest. The Administrator's Seal of the Exalted Prima grants you ownership of the Prima Vessel on your home planet (Earth) and grants you the ability to teleport to it (limitations apply, cooldown based on the difficulty of the teleport). Wearing this Seal allows you to enter the Seat of the Exalted Prima of the Milky Way Galaxy (requires B-grade). Stat amounts granted by this item scale with level. Enchantments: +14400 Adaptive Stats. Adaptive Stat Amplication. Administrator's Privileges. Administrator's Teleportation. As you further your qualifications as an Administrator named by the Exalted Prima, this item can be further upgraded.

Requirements: Soulbound.

Jake very vividly remembered being jealous as hell of the version of this ring granted to everyone else but him after they had slain the Prima Guardian on Earth. He also remembered thinking that surely he would get his own version once the event concluded, and it turns out he had been entirely correct.

The ring back then had granted +10000 Adaptive Stats, and you could only exceed the stat cap by 2500. Jake's here was clearly better, and what's more, it would only keep getting better as he kept leveling up. Sure, maybe the others also got an upgrade to their rings, but Jake was more than happy.

Really, looking at the ring, it really was overpowered. Giving effectively 14400 stats was kind of close to half of the total stat points Jake could get from items, and one had to remember Jake had stupid high stats in the first place due to all his titles and the Malefic Viper Legacy skills being cheats.

Regarding the stats that the mythical item granted, it wasn't hard to see where the numbers came from. 2880 was clearly from the fact he was level 288 in his race level, and 14400 was just half of that times a hundred. When put in perspective, it made it feel like the ring gave Jake an extra ten stats whenever he leveled up due to the ability to go above the stat cap, with the total stats granted by the ring increasing by fifty every time he gained a level. With how high Jake's stat gain was, that did mean the ring with proportionally grow weaker with time, but the mere fact it scaled at all was huge. Plus, it said he had a chance to upgrade it further in the future, so he could totally see its scaling get re-adjusted later on.

As for all the other things the ring did... well, that was probably a big part of why it jumped to being mythical and not legendary, though the ability to scale and upgrade was already a pretty damn impressive ability. Granting the ability to teleport using the Seal was just the icing on the cake, not the mention the final part that, to many, was perhaps the most important: Updates are released by *novel·fire·net*

It allowed him access to the Seat of the Exalted Prima in the Milky Way Galaxy... once he reached B-grade, that is. So still a way to go in that department, but at least this did seem to confirm that the fight for the Seat would continue in B-grade. Or, of course, one could also see it as it beginning right now, as every newly promoted Administrator had just been told they had until B-grade to get rid of any competition for the World Wonder.

Anyway, Jake naturally put on the new ring and discarded an old ring he bought even before Nevermore. Losing 1000 Perception, 200 Wisdom, and 200 Intelligence for 14400 Adaptive Stats definitely wasn't a bad trade, and Jake instantly felt the connection with the ring and even his ability to teleport to the Prima Vessel.

Before, he had been already wearing the ring, but due to equipment limitations, he hadn't been wearing, wearing the ring in the eyes of the system. Now, he was, and it felt

pretty damn good. He tried testing it a bit as the others had done back when they got their own inferior versions of the ring, and it felt odd to actively have his stats amplified based on his actions. Summoning an orb of arcane mana, Jake felt his Willpower and Wisdom be amplified by the ring, and when he tried to make the orb more destructive, Intelligence also got boosted. Focusing a bit more on control with it, Perception even got improved.

Definitely an awesome damn ring, Jake concluded, happy with it. He also dove a bit into the teleportation feature of the ring to get a feel for how good it was. He had expected it to maybe work within the entire galaxy, but when he scanned the innate ability, he was surprised.

It was good... really fucking good. Jake wasn't entirely sure, but he got the feeling that the teleportation would likely even work as an extra escape method of sorts in certain circumstances. It was powerful and high in conceptual complexity, which should make it capable of piercing many kinds of seals and formations. He didn't think it would allow for teleportation between universes, but if combined with some extra help, then maybe...

Not that any of that was super important right now.

With his new ring on his finger, Jake considered what to do now. He had the option of contacting Miranda and getting an update on things from her, but he could also just reach out to Villy right away. He felt his connection with the god be more open now, but there were definitely still some restrictions on it, and he was pretty damn certain that while he should be capable of contacting the god, Villy couldn't contact Jake. Moreover, Jake couldn't just casually reach out but had to meditate and actively work on contacting the god.

This also meant Villy couldn't watch his livestream of Jake's actions. Probably for the best, as Jake would definitely have noticed even while hyper-focusing if someone was suddenly peeking at him, and that minor distraction could have been disastrous.

Seeing as contacting the god wouldn't be an instant thing, he decided to reach out to Miranda first. Jake went over to the phone installed by Arnold and used it to call Miranda in her office. Instantly, it was picked up, but not by Miranda. Instead, Jake heard Lillian's voice, and she sounded pretty damn stressed while speaking, not even giving Jake any time to get a word out.

"You're finally done? Good, get your ass over here now... shit has hit the fan, and we're not the only ones who've been plotting."

Jake took a moment and saw he'd been hung up on. Lillian had definitely sounded like she was in a rush, and Jake didn't delay as he quickly made his way up to the lodge and toward Miranda's office, muttering to himself on the way.

"Probably a good thing I called there first..."

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Chapter 993: Momentum In All Things

A lot could go wrong in a very short amount of time. Especially when there were so many factors at play and different people and factions with their own agendas running around trying to get the best out of the situation they possibly could.

To further complicate things, add on top of that people who thought they were allies suddenly no longer in agreement. Oh yeah, and to really fuck things up, have not only the ninety-third universe be in quite a state of change and turmoil, but have other places in the multiverse also reaching a boiling point.

Jake, after being told by Lillian to hurry, rushed to the office in Haven as quickly as he could and found the entire place scrambling. People were flying back and forth, and through his Sphere, he saw quite a few familiar faces being hard at work doing... something.

He didn't spot Miranda anywhere, though, so he quickly headed inside and straight for Miranda's office, where Lillian was yelling at two guys. They left quickly, and Jake took the opportunity to sneak inside. He revealed himself from stealth, with Lillian not even showing the slightest surprise at his sudden appearance.

"Good, you're here, let's go," Lillian said, immediately going past Jake. "We're heading to the Prima Vessel."

Jake wanted to ask what was going on but followed for now as he reached out telepathically, talking as they walked.

"What's happening?"

"A lot," Lillian briefly answered before elaborating. "The moment the final Prima Guardian was slain, we barely had time to take it in before the attacks arrived. The Prima Vessels remain active even now, meaning the teleporters like the one Arnold made are still fully functional. What's more, the regular teleportation circles for the Prima Guardian Alliance also still work and likely will continue to work until the event is fully over for the entire universe. We had halfway expected this, as the system clearly wants to facilitate diplomatic relations during this period, and allowing cultural intermingling is only expected... but we didn't expect them to be used like this."

"Who's attacking? Ell'Hakan?" Jake asked, the two of them already heading to the teleporter in Haven to take them to the Prima Vessel.

"He's certainly involved, but no, not directly... we neglected to consider a lot of things, including what would happen with the planets that had fallen to the Prima Guardians. The assumption was that they would be taken over by the local beasts, which did prove correct, but we didn't expect them to immediately launch attacks once able, partly because we didn't think they would be able to, seeing as they didn't join the alliance," Lillian said, the two of them having reached the teleporter as they kept speaking telepathically.

"How did they teleport when-"

"We're not entirely sure, but we know they were allowed in by local beasts and monsters or at least allies of them," Lillian cut him off as she activated the teleporter, making the two of them reach the other side of the planet in a flash. *"Monsters usually don't work together due to their nature, especially not different species... but in this instance, they have a uniting force: the alliance created by Yip of Yore. Most of the random gods we didn't know much of have sided with Yip, or perhaps they had always sided with him... the result is the same."*

Jake tried to wrap his head around everything she was saying. He knew that Yip of Yore had a lot of gods on his side, sure. However, it didn't sound like this was in any way within expectations just going by the otherwise cool and collected Lillian being this stressed out.

"Do we have any idea of how many gods are involved?" Jake asked. They had estimated at least a few hundred had to be involved and helping Ell'Hakan. However, if it was over a thousand, it could perhaps prove troublesome, but it shouldn't-

"Thousands... way more than anyone could have predicted. The Holy Church is also far more involved than I first believed and seemingly ordered their followers to fully go along with Ell'Hakan's plans," Lillian answered, flying forward with her moonlight magic, Jake following her and easily keeping pace, the Prima Vessel right in front of them.

Inside, he spotted the expected characters. The Sword Saint, Miranda, Vesperia, Caleb, Sky Whale, Carmen, Kindroth, Casper, and several others who had also been in the lodge meeting had gathered, though absent were all the random World Leaders Jake had seen before.

Arnold, William, and Sandy were also inside the vessel but in the room with the teleporter, doing something. Jake wanted to ask Lillian about what but had more pressing questions. ¶

“What in the actual fuck happened?” Jake asked, not even bothering with telepathy anymore as they reached the entrance to the Prima Vessel. “I know I was absent, but... alright, what’s the damage? What’s the nature of these attacks?”

“A lot of them are political, with people creating riots and what can only be called attempts at civil war. However, the biggest problem is the interference of the gods... they’re recruiting everywhere. Giving Blessings left and right to anyone who will do their bidding, including those who have any authority over the teleporters. Quite a few World Leaders have also even been tempted, with others switching sides. This is just talking about the enlightened, with the beasts and monsters a far bigger problem. We knew that the Holy Church didn’t consist solely of enlightened, but we didn’t expect them to have this many monsters hidden as part of their factions, too, just lying in wait.” Fresh chapters posted on *novel·fire·net*

She proceeded to elaborate as they walked with hurried steps through the Prima Vessel, getting him fully up to speed about what had happened. As she said, two kinds of attacks had been launched instantly, one using the teleportation network established by the event and the other from internal conflicts on the planets. The primary instigators of this were the gods who supported Ell’Hakan, including many affiliated with the Holy Church.

Many of these individuals had apparently been prepared for what was to happen when it came to internal conflicts. Others were instantly informed as divine messages were sent from the gods the second communication was back on the menu.

Adding on top of that, the gods had begun spreading their faith and granting Blessings left and right. Usually, getting a Blessing from a god wasn’t easy at all, and getting a high-level Blessing required you to be an already extraordinary figure. However, now they were being offered with no more requirements than loyalty and being useful... with the most useful those who could operate the alliance teleporters.

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Two fucking days... that was how long Jake couldn’t be contacted, and shit had well truly hit the fan as Lillian had said, and he wasn’t even sure where to start. He was confused about one thing, though, and turned to Lillian as they fast approached the control room where Miranda and the others were already actively discussing.

“This all seems so damn fast,” Jake said, now within earshot of the people in the control room. “Where did they get the guts to act this brazen? Aren’t they afraid of how we’ll retaliate?”

“They don’t appear to be, and I believe It’s strongly due to what’s happening in the rest of the multiverse... more accurately, in the first universe,” Miranda answered as she

turned and looked at Jake with a grave look as he and Lillian had arrived at the open doors to the control room.

“Elaborate,” Jake said, returning her serious look.

“Right as communication was reestablished, I made contact with my Patrons, and they were in a panic,” Miranda said, looking Jake in the eyes. She looked as if she really didn’t want to say the next part, but took a deep breath and did so as she knew there really wasn’t a choice.

“I don’t know how or from where, but it was leaked that the Malefic Viper had forcefully interfered in something in the ninety-third universe using a Transcendent Skill and had suffered a backlash from doing so, leaving him injured... Yip of Yore took advantage immediately. I’m still very unclear on the exact situation, but as I said, my Patrons are in a panic, and things aren’t looking good as Yip and his allies have gone on the offensive, and the Order is in shambles.”

The others in the room also had severe looks on their faces as Miranda spoke. A pit had opened in Jake’s stomach as he heard this, guilt washing over him, and he clenched his fists hard.

“Jake... I know the Malefic One has some plans, but he couldn’t have planned for what happened a few months ago, and... this doesn’t feel controlled at all. I don’t think this is something the Viper intended or is part of his schemes, and you *really* need to talk to him if possible.”

A single drop of blood fell from Jake’s right fist as his nails dug into his skin, but he didn’t react and just turned around quickly, not even having to say that he was on his way to contact the Viper... assuming he was able to.

--

Momentum.

Many factors played a role in a fight, but perhaps the most important was momentum. To have the other party move to the beat of your drum and dictate the flow of combat was essential to come out victorious and overpowering your opponent. Jake had won many battles throughout his life, not because he was stronger than his foe, but because he was able to claim momentum and never lose it, making the other party fail to fully display their power as he simply never gave them the opening to do so.

Control over momentum was one of the reasons why Valdemar was viewed as a near-unbeatable machine. He was able to forcefully break through your momentum and reclaim it with a single swipe of his axe and shift his gear in an instant if the battle required it. However, it wasn’t only in a fight momentum held so much importance.

In wars, it was arguably even more important. Having momentum meant you had high morale, motivated fighters, and belief in victory. For the longest time, there hadn't been any true conflict between the Malefic Viper and Yip of Yore. Everything had just been a proverbial dick-measuring contest or a proxy battle using their Chosen. Things hadn't truly escalated as Yip had continued to build himself up until he believed it was time to strike and begin their actual battle. He was waiting for a moment where striking would allow him to instantly claim momentum and set the pace of the conflict... and such an opportunity had been handed to him on a silver platter.

The Malefic Viper, a Primordial who hadn't proven himself for a long time and was someone only surviving on his reputation, had gone and gotten himself injured. When one spoke about gods getting injured, one never really considered physical injury, as such things could easily be healed.

Such couldn't be said about injuries to the soul. Soul injuries could take extremely long to heal for gods, and sometimes, the god couldn't recover fully at all. In lower grades, one could recover from nearly everything simply with time and the system helping out, but that wasn't the case for gods. Time tended to do very little, and expensive items and other such things were required for recovery.

Of course, seeing as the Malefic Viper was an alchemist, it was expected he had methods to speed up his recovery, but no one believed even he could heal instantly, especially not when he had presumably directly interfered with another universe with his Transcendent Skill during a system event. That's why Yip of Yore hadn't hesitated and pushed forward his plans as he made his move the moment he learned of it.

Starting a fight with your enemy already on the back foot was the best way to instantly claim momentum, especially for someone like Yip of Yore, who benefitted from concepts such as momentum far more than anyone else. The narrative escalation directly empowered him, and as he built to the grand finale, he would only grow stronger and stronger until it was finally time to face his fated enemy.

But before that, he had to keep building his legend while undermining belief in the Primordial.

Ever since the Malefic Viper had returned, his Order had begun to once more expand, but now these expansions proved to be nothing more than easy targets for Yip and his minions. Gods didn't even have to get involved, as branches in several universes were attacked before they even stood a chance at mustering a proper response.

Territories claimed by the Order were taken and promptly returned to the factions the Order of the Malefic Viper had claimed them from when they established their branches, assuming there were any survivors yet to reclaim the land, that is. Yip of Yore swept through like a hero, purging the presence of the Malefic One wherever he went.

The Order naturally responded as battles broke out that made the conflict in the Milky Way Galaxy look like children playing in comparison. S-grades died in the thousands as none had yet to deploy gods directly, but things were heavily escalating as the multiverse looked on.

Everyone waited. Waited for the Malefic One to make himself known and crush the conflict as the Primordial he was, yet as the days passed... nothing. No response at all from the Viper himself, and when it was leaked that the Lord Protector had taken charge of dealing with the conflict, doubt only grew.

Yip of Yore happily jumped on this, proclaiming the Viper was afraid of facing him. With every passing day, his words only appeared more and more like the truth, as it was clear the Order was on the back foot. They simply didn't have the numbers Yip of Yore had been able to muster, and many of the gods part of the newer generations were excited at the prospect of going after the old guard of the multiverse.

It wasn't even a secret that many gods were unsatisfied with the status quo of the multiverse. The largest factions were all established in the first few eras, with no new ones ever growing to even be worthy comparisons. They saw Yip of Yore and what he was doing as an opportunity to change this, and not just because it would make them feel better, but to set a precedent.

Records worked in mysterious ways, and if Yip of Yore managed to truly prove himself a being capable of standing up to the ancient gods, he would also prove it was possible for the new gods to catch up and rival the ancients. A real chance for a new peak faction to appear in the multiverse, not ruled by a god who ascended in the first couple of eras.

Of course, many still doubted Yip of Yore, but with every passing day, belief in him grew. Especially when no other faction stepped in to interfere. Perhaps because they feared Valhal would also step in if they got involved, but the result was that all the peak factions of the multiverse were nothing but passive observers of everything going on.

At least they were passive in ninety-two of the universes... but the same couldn't be said about the ninety-third, where they were far keener to get directly involved, especially the Holy Church and Valhal.

Not many focused on this new universe, though, as all eyes were on the two gods who were bound to face one another sooner rather than later, and all were waiting for when the Malefic Viper would finally respond... and if said response would be enough to turn the momentum in his favor, or only continue to build Yip of Yore's.

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Chapter 994: Exactly What He Wants

Viridia stepped through space as a verdant aura followed in her wake, consuming the corpse of a slain S-grade who'd come for her life. Raising her hand, a magical seal filled the empty cosmos as a gateway to the Lagoon opened, sending out tendrils to attack the two S-grades, battling her guardians and putting them under immense pressure. Her two opponents both reacted as one of them raised a sword and sent a web of crescent blades her way, severing the tendrils before they had the chance to do any harm.

However, as the cut-up tendrils fell, the pieces all transformed into female figures that shot toward the same sword-wielding warrior from before. His eyes opened wide as once more his blade flashed, all remnants of Viridia's magic fully dispelled with his follow-up attack.

She had achieved her goal, though, and her two guardians had managed to team up on the second S-grade, injuring him heavily. The sword-wielding S-grade saw his comrade in trouble and, considering the two of them were also running low on resources after having battled for nearly a full day, made a decision.

Pointing his sword to the distant stars above, silver light erupted as his weapon seemed to grow in size. A thousand swords fanned out and bloomed from his raised blade, the aura of a man recognized as a true swordmaster spreading as space itself was cut and broken in several places. Viridia responded as she held out what looked like a doll resembling a toad. Crushing it in her palm, a mirage of a giant creature appeared behind her, opening its mouth as a wave of very much real acid was released, seeking to corrode the swordmaster.

"I will have to take my leave, Lady of the Verdant Lagoon," the swordmaster said with a bow as his blades met her beam of acid, the two attacks nullifying one another. "I hope you have time to realize the errors of your way before it's too late... and if not, let our next meeting be the last."

Her two guardians tried to attack the swordmaster, but he easily fended them off and created an opening as he and his comrade made their escape, teleporting after making some distance and getting out of the spatial seal created by one of her guardians.

Viridia frowned as she saw the Chosen of one of the Godqueens supporting Yip of Yore leave and clenched her fists in frustration at failing to take down someone so many levels below herself... but she knew it hadn't really been an option in the first place. Even if she had been stronger, someone of his status was bound to have plenty of trump cards hidden to, at the very least, keep his life.

"Hall Master, the enemy is retreating from this and the neighboring galaxy, regrouping here," one of her guardians promptly informed her as he summoned an elaborate map using mana, only making Viridia sigh more.

The moment they had any kind of advantage, Yip of Yore had his forces retreat, never giving the Order any chance to land a proper blow. She wanted to give the order to chase but was fully aware that wouldn't end well for them, so she focused on what she could do.

"Any news of Aisorok?" she asked, inquiring if anything had been uncovered related to the missing newly appointed Hall Master.

"Nothing as of now. He remains missing, but things point to their ambush succeeding," the guardian responded.

"How about the Bloodwing Duchess?"

"She got back in contact, having successfully escaped, but suffered significant injuries as she had to use a dangerous skill," the guardian shook his head. "She estimates full recovery should take her around a century, faster if she has access to high-quality blood."

"Providing that shouldn't prove too difficult," Viridia spoke, waving her hand as a portal appeared. "We're heading to the next battlefield immediately. Recover on the way."

"Yes, Hall Master," both responded in unison as they took to the next area.

For the Hall Master herself to be this involved in the conflict may seem weird to many, but Viridia truly didn't have a choice. There weren't that many S-grades officially part of the Order in the first place, and as the highest-ranked mortal, Viridia felt a responsibility to step up. In part, she did this to show that the Order was fighting back with full force, and so far, she had single-handedly slain over forty S-grades of varying power.

This number barely registered in the statistics of how many had fallen on both sides thus far, which made Viridia very worried. They were outnumbered, and not by a little, even when one considered the people deployed by the Hidden Ones supporting the Order from the shadows. Their faction had never been a large one in the first place, and while each of their S-grades tended to be stronger than the enemy's, the gap wasn't that large.

The battle had only been raging for a couple of months, but the damage was already great, and nearly all of the newly established Halls were destroyed. A few had their leaders manage to muster a defense, beating back the enemy and evacuating, while others stupidly tried to hold their ground, but the result was clear on all fronts... they had to retreat or die, taking down as many enemies in the process as possible.

Over the last decade, the Order of the Malefic Viper had actively expanded into most other universes, and now, in only a few months, they had been pushed back out of all but three, with that number rapidly dwindling to only the first universe.

Viridia was trying to help them evacuate while strengthening their foothold in the first universe. No matter what, they couldn't lose any ground on Primordial-4, and so far, Yip's forces hadn't even tried. The fact they hadn't wasn't a comforting thing, though, as Viridia knew this was only the beginning.

This was still nothing more than a battle of mortals. Gods moved the pieces on the chessboard, but neither player had decided to get up and punch the other party yet. No one seemed willing to make the first move either.

Yip of Yore and his side didn't have to. They were winning ground without any direct divine interference, so why would they want to escalate? Everyone knew that the second a god acted directly, it would turn the conflict into something entirely different than what it was now. Even the gods who had been in other Halls of the Order had only been able to stand by and do nothing as the local branch was destroyed, none willing or able to be the one responsible for an escalation. In many instances, even trying to help them evacuate could be seen as gods now getting involved... it was all so truly frustrating.

During all this, countless factions were watching on, but none had gotten involved, not even Valhal. The neutral factions expectedly stayed out of everything, and while some did believe many were just waiting for a chance to pick a side, the predominant belief was that none would get involved once more due to the fear of escalation. Follow current novels on novel•

No one knew if the Order had allies no one knew about. If any ancient accords existed that would come into effect if any of the other big players of the multiverse got involved. There was also a fear that an enemy faction would use it as an excuse to get involved. It was very well-known that whenever the Risen got into a big conflict, the Holy Church always found some excuse to also get involved, and vice-versa. There were no indications any of these two were interested in stepping in, though.

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An important distinction also had to be made there. While the Holy Church had allied with the Chosen of Yip and Yore, and the two factions supported one another in the ninety-third universe, there was no alliance or relationship of any kind outside of that one galaxy in the new universe.

However, even if no other factions stepped in, Viridia knew an escalation did have to happen at some point. The problem was that none at the Order of the Malefic Viper knew what their Patron wanted them to do. The Lord Protector had taken charge and

directed the mortal forces of the Order, as he had done so many times before, but this time wasn't the same as the prior conflicts. Their Patron had returned... the Malefic Viper was back... yet so far, he'd done or said nothing.

Even so, Viridia refused to doubt him. He was the Malefic One. A Primordial. The Patron of the Order she had dedicated her life to, and even in this period of conflict, she didn't waver in her faith once. She would trust the Viper until he either proved them all wrong and dealt with the situation as he saw fit... or something happened that made it impossible to keep faith.

Viridia didn't see that as an option. She simply couldn't imagine a world where a Primordial fell, much less the Malefic One... and she wasn't going to give her enemy a chance to even reach him as long as her life remained intact.

No one could get in contact with the Malefic Viper, but one mortal was certainly trying.

Jake had hurried to leave the Prima Vessel and gone to the small outpost with the teleporter nearby. There, he'd quickly found an empty room in one of the temporary buildings, sealed it using his arcane mana, and gotten to work. He had to put down a pretty basic formation to contact the Malefic Viper, doing what was essentially a religious ritual.

He was nervous as he finished everything and tried to reach out. Guilt was eating at him as he blamed himself for everything that was going on. Jake knew the Viper had a lot of plans and intricate scheming, but as Miranda said, he couldn't have planned for Jake to fuck up. No one could. If he'd somehow messed everything up due to his own stupid experimentation with Origin Energy...

As these thoughts whirled around in his head, he felt the bridge between universes form as he made contact with the Malefic Viper. Jake also felt that the ritual was barely needed anymore, meaning that he could communicate like he had before all this went down. It could be compared to a phone line having been cut over, and Jake had now fixed it and fully reestablished the connection... at least for now.

Jake also instantly felt the Viper's gaze back upon him, and before Jake could speak, the Viper's voice echoed in his head.

"You look like a mess... something stressing you out?"

The tone of the Primordial felt out of place. He sounded relaxed and unbothered, making Jake confused as he answered. "You're stressing me out. What the hell is happening on your end? Something about a war? How are you doing?"

"Wow, instantly putting all the responsibility on me, huh? Well, alright, yeah, we got a little scuffle going on over here. It's just the kind of thing that happens when gods compete; mortals get caught in the crossfire. You shouldn't worry overly much about it."

It's not like any of your C-grade friends will get involved. As for how I'm doing? Could be better, could be worse, I guess," the Viper said, the last part in an almost teasing tone.

"No, really, how are you?" Jake kept asking, concerned. "You used your Transcendent Skill to help me during the event..."

"First, let's just make it clear those are two separate things, both problematic. Interfering in the ninety-third universe wasn't something the system liked, and I did indeed have to pay for having done so. Transcendent Skills also all require a price to be paid upon usage, especially when the skill is fully used, as it was in this case. Combined, using a Transcendent Skill to interfere with a system event in a restricted universe is indeed not something that can be done for free, and a significant level of backlash is only to be expected," Villy explained.

Jake wasn't sure why the Viper wanted to point out that those two things weren't the same, especially in this situation where they both clearly mattered. However, he felt like the Viper didn't want to tell him everything, so he asked the most important question:

"Will you be alright?"

"I dare anyone to claim I won't be," the Viper simply responded, his voice confident. "I told you this many times before, Jake. Don't worry about me. You're far too young and weak to be worrying about me, and clearly, you've shown plenty of propensity to make yourself not alright on several occasions, so maybe you should focus on yourself first? Speaking of... how are you doing? You look a lot better than I expected you to."

"I'm fully healed," Jake said, and for the first time the response of the Viper seemed surprised.

"Already? Not bad, not bad at all... Palate is still fucked, though, but we can talk about that later. Hm, I also feel something else different... wait, what happened to that Unique Lifeform of yours?"

Jake didn't question how the Viper knew something had happened as he proceeded to explain what had gone down. He gave a super brief overview of the system event at the Viper's prompting and then explained what had happened to the Fallen King and everything related to the Desolate Child of Loss and what he'd learned, though he did get the feeling the god had guessed a lot related to the Desolate Child from when he healed Jake. Villy was quiet for a bit after Jake was done talking, as he seemed to consider everything.

"The Runemaiden is correct, and this is clearly a False God you're dealing with. Man, your little world really does have everything for something like that to appear, especially such a rare and powerful one. The Records of your galaxy are seriously out of whack and something worth studying more closely with all the weird shit going on. Also, I'm sorry about the Unique Lifeform. I can help take a look at the mask when you can come

to the Order, but let me offer some words of comfort: as long as the Truesoul remains, there is hope. Even if the entire body is destroyed and there is nothing else, everything can be rebuilt with the Truesoul as the basis, assuming the system allows it and the Unique Lifeform was as competent as I believe him to be," Villy commented on the situation, his words offering some comfort. Jake had bitten onto one portion of what he said, though.

"You said "dealing with" the False God. Present tense. Do you mean that...?" Jake asked, hoping the Viper wasn't insinuating what he thought he was.

"Based on what you told me, it more than likely still lives. False Gods are very hard to kill as long as faith in them persists. They are very malleable creatures that are a pain to get rid of, as death often only means they undergo change rather than perishing."

"Well, fuck," Jake muttered.

"Eh, going by what you said, you clearly have the tools to handle it. If nothing else, send the Runemaiden after it; she can take care of the little False God," the Viper said casually.

"No fucking way am I sending her alone," Jake protested. "Unless you mean to take her with me. If we all go together, we can definitely find a way to kill it for good."

"Why bother? Just send her. She's a damn Runemaiden fighting a False God that seemingly possesses only the powers of desolation. It's not a fair fight at all," the Viper insisted in his casual tone.

"Does she hard-counter the Desolate Child or something?" Jake asked, unsure why the Viper insisted she could handle the False God and even more unsure why he seemed kind of annoyed at the prospect despite being the one suggesting it.

"Something like that... anyway, let's discuss more relevant matters," the Viper said, getting things back on track after what seemed like a random side track. *"Get me fully up to speed on how things are looking in your universe because all I know from over on this side of the proverbial veil between worlds is that Yip of Yore hasn't just launched an offensive in the old universes."*

"Yeah, shit's also going down here..." Jake said, as he very briefly gave the Viper an overview of what he had just been told only a few minutes prior.

"Sounds like he's going for a big takeover, huh..." the Viper said, deep in thought.

"For sure," Jake nodded. "Do you have any thoughts on things?"

"I do, I do. But I would like to hear where your mind is at first," the Viper said.

Jake was silent for a moment before sighing. "I just wanna fucking kill the guy and get this bullshit over with. I'm tired of Ell'Hakan just starting shit all the time. You know, I was already planning to launch an offensive, but the moment I am about to do something, he moves first. It's so damn frustrating. I wanted to attack before communication even opened up, but I wanted to talk to you first to make clear I wasn't messing anything up on your end... well, more than I already have. Anyway, that's where my head is at."

Villy thought for a while as he spoke in the kind of tone where Jake knew the god was grinning on the other side. *"You know... we could do something really funny and entirely unexpected."*

"What?" Jake asked, curious.

"Give the Chosen exactly what he wants... a heretic and would-be Usurper of the Malefic Viper."

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Chapter 995: A Grand Scheme

The conflict between the Viper and Yip of Yore was beginning to enter its later phases, pushed forward by recent happenings, and as any good schemer, the Viper had adapted to the situation.

In truth, Jake really didn't want to do more schemes to get one over Ell'Hakan, but he was caught between a rock and a hard place. While he didn't want to be a schemer, the Viper sure did, and it was a good thing Jake had talked to Villy because if he had just gone with his plan of attacking Ell'Hakan, it could have messed with Villy significantly. Especially if Jake succeeded.

Jake didn't really want to do anything that could mess with the Viper... especially not when he felt shitty about the entire situation with Palate, and he felt like he owed the god a massive favor. So, despite not being a fan of not just taking the simplified approach of putting an arrow in Ell'Hakan's skull, he would go along with whatever the Viper wanted. Assuming the plan didn't suck, that is.

"I'm not sure I'll like whatever you're about to suggest, but sure. Shoot," Jake said.

"Alright, this is going to be a long one, so strap in. I have been thinking how to really leverage this entire angle of you being unsatisfied with me as your Patron, and

everything does really seem to be lining up well for us to tell a little story. Your display of catering to Valhal in front of Ell'Hakan's men was a nice touch, and for a while now, many have been expecting something to happen with you. So let's make it happen," the Viper said before he continued.

"Let me also clarify one more thing. While it's common knowledge by now I used my Transcendent Skill to do some form of interference in the ninety-third universe, no one truly knows what I did there. Not anyone who would rat me out anyway. If we want, we can even spin it to me having done something to you as part of my efforts of making you unable to be freed from me even if you wanted to. Honestly, me doing something like that would also fit my personality and reputation, wouldn't you agree?"

"No, not really," Jake shrugged. "You don't seem like the kind who would bother forcing someone into servitude that way. Seems inefficient, and I doubt anyone like me would ever take that lying down, making it seem childishly evil."

"Duh, of course you wouldn't, which is why you are really fucking angry I did it to you," the Viper said. *"And looking evil isn't a problem, as I am evil, right? Evil and arrogant."*

"One question," Jake said, skipping back a bit in the conversation. "How do people even know you used your Transcendent Skill? It happened inside my Soulspace, right? Through your Records and whatnot? No one should have seen any of that."

"It did indeed happen in your Soulspace, but I did have to pierce the veil between worlds to get there. Not fully, but I had to do something the system didn't like for me to assist you. Doing something like that is bound to send echoes out, and many felt I did something," the Viper explained. *"Eversmile then confirmed it afterward, being the go-to kind of guy to notice stuff like that with his constant karmic tracking of most notable figures in the entire multiverse."*

"And he then told Yip of Yore?"

"Not sure he even had to, but yes, he did help Yip reach the conclusion that now was a great moment to strike," Villy confirmed. The source of this content is `novel★fire★net`

"At this point, I'm still not sure if that guy is a friend or foe..." Jake muttered.

"Sometimes the world isn't black and white."

"I would prefer if it was," Jake sighed, finding all of this scheming incredibly tiring. He wanted to ask more about if the Viper would really be fine, but held himself back as he returned to the topic before. "Anyway, you want me to come out as a heretic or what?"

"Kind of, but not really. Not fully, at least. I want you to aim higher than merely being a heretic... I want you to aim to be a Usurper of my Path," Villy said, Jake knowing he was grinning evilly on the other side before really laying out his plan:

"Think about it... the Chosen of the Malefic Viper is wavering in his faith, something the evil Primordial, of course, notices. Therefore, he injects – or had already injected - his Chosen with a conditional poison that will activate should he move too close to the line of being a heretic. This ends up happening during the system event, forcing the Viper to activate the poison, but due to the barrier, he ends up having to use his Transcendence to break through, and even then, he only ends up injuring his Chosen. Perhaps as a warning, or perhaps because he wasn't able to entrap him outright due to the system... it doesn't matter. All that matters is that the Malefic Viper knows his Chosen is rebelling and isn't happy about it."

Jake listened, looking for any obvious plot holes as he did point one out: "Why wouldn't you just retract your Blessing or outright kill me?"

"Kill you? Kill Jake Thayne, the Harbinger of Primeval Origins and the one holding the top score on the Nevermore Leaderboards? That guy? Nah, killing him would be such a waste and uselessly piss off other factions who want to use him. Nah, better to make it impossible for him to escape while skirting the rules set by the Bloodline Accords. You underestimate your own value, Jake. You're like a precious natural treasure, and would the avaricious Malefic Viper really give that up so easily?"

"Fair enough," Jake muttered, motioning for the Viper to continue to spin his story, gladly accepting the compliment.

"Anyway, clearly, you aren't happy with me and are looking for a way out. But you are also greedy. Ambitious. You have begun to read the currents of change and believe you finally found a way to escape my clutches without missing out on anything: becoming a Usurper of my Path. It makes a lot of sense. As my Chosen, you are in a prime position to do it, and it isn't like there's no precedent for Chosen ending up turning on their Patrons and trying to consume their Path. That's also why you won't outright denounce my Blessing, but you will show tendencies of a heretic, forcing me to either retract my Blessing and suffer another backlash or simply accept that's happening. You usurping me would allow you to not lose anything and keep your Path as an alchemist and all my skills without any restrictions. Of course, it would be hard for you to do as a mere C-grade, but with the help of Valhal? Yeah, it could totally happen. Naturally, for you to usurp me, having me be dead first is highly preferable, making you more than happy to help Yip of Yore weaken me further while empowering him through the narrative of turning me into a Primordial that's not even able to have his own Chosen stay loyal, while at the same time not being smart enough to cut my losses when I probably should have."

Jake had to admit the Viper had clearly been thinking about this a lot, or maybe he was just making stuff up on the spot, but Jake found himself nodding along as he imagined

what he would have done if Villy turned out to be an utter dickhead. He didn't want to hurt his own Path, so renouncing the Viper entirely and joining Valhal didn't seem that appealing, but making the Viper's Path his own by usurping it? That would result in Jake losing pretty much nothing outside the powerful backing of a Primordial, something he would instantly replace with Valhal.

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"Of course, being an aspiring Usurper doesn't directly make you an ally of Yip of Yore or Ell'Hakan. Your interests just temporarily align, so it makes sense you remain cautious of the other Chosen, especially seeing as you are still competing. You switching to wanting to be all buddy-buddy with him wouldn't make any sense, but showing a bit of restraint until your Patron is dealt with? That you can do. Afterward, you will leave with Valhal, who also only has a temporary alliance with Yip of Yore. In other words, you're not allying or forming any positive relations with your opponents; you're just selfishly using them to fulfill your own goal of being free of me and usurping my Path. What's more, none of your emotions should you encounter Ell'Hakan would be wrong. He is no mind reader, and your feeling of dislike is only to be expected. You clearly don't like him, and this won't change that, and you will continue to restrain yourself until the situation between Yip and I is dealt with."

Again, Jake didn't find any obvious flaws in what the Viper planned, though he would still be very cautious around the other Chosen. None of them truly understood Ell'Hakan's Bloodline, and while Jake didn't think it was some perfect sniffer of schemes that could instantly determine Jake was up to something, he didn't see the need to risk meeting the guy if he could avoid it.

"Alright, let's just say I'm all on board so far... why the hell would they believe this tall tale? Also, you said I would be a heretic, but it doesn't sound like I'll actually reveal my identity as a heretic. Thought a part of your plan was to have this entire shocking reveal where I suddenly switched to fully unleashing my inner heretic aura," Jake pointed out.

"Oh, you'll have your moment, don't you worry. Just not right away. Can't frontload everything. No, you will become a heretic when I'm truly pushed into a corner, and in my pure anger at fully discovering your betrayal and the fact you're helping my enemies, I will reclaim my Blessing and brand you a heretic, at which point, you just go ahead and unleash that bad boy," the Viper said, enjoying this far more than someone who was currently in a deathly conflict with another pinnacle god.

"I assume you would let me know?"

"Naturally," Villy said in a cheerful tone, as he seemed to be enjoying how his scheme was coming together.

"Still haven't touched on why they would believe everything if I don't even reveal myself as a heretic," Jake once more pointed out.

"I was getting to that, jeez, the impatience," the Viper said, continuing to explain his dastardly plan. "Any good lie needs at least some element of truth. The fact you aren't a real believer and have that inner heretic is just one part that you can show off, you just need to keep the actual heretic aura hidden. You can shit-talk me all you want to sell the lie, and I'll only be slightly offended when I hear what you said about me after all this is done."

"Oh, I thought I could shit-talk you at all times already," Jake joked with a smile.

"Rude... anyway, besides mixing some lies with truth, how about we do one better? Physical evidence that I poisoned you to keep you under my control," Villy definitely smirked on the other end.

"You know, I'm about fifty-fifty on if you actually did poison me or you are referring to something else," Jake muttered.

"Oh, but I did poison you. Don't you remember? Before you returned to Earth from your Tutorial, I made you undertake the Trial of Myriad Poisons, upgrading your Palate and Blood skills in the process," Villy reminded him. *"Of course, this is where the version of what happened may differ a bit. But honestly, my version is way more probably, as who would believe that some weak E-grade managed to consume a drop of my blood, managed to suppress its Innate Records, and is now storing it in their Soulshape? Preposterous!"*

Jake had a wry smile as the god kept going.

"No... no, it's far more probable this drop was planted there by the Malefic One. A bomb within your soul, ready to corrode you from the inside out at my command. Oh, the horror of living with this, with me having lied about it, saying it was there to benefit you, but as your doubt about me has grown, the truth was revealed, which was what led to all this and me using my Transcendent Skill. Only Valhal can keep you safe now, and only my death can fully ensure your safety. Oh, and the drop will surely function as an excellent jumping-off point to truly make yourself my Usurper."

"Man, all this is actually starting to sound pretty solid," Jake said, nodding thoughtfully. "Maybe you're onto something with this entire betraying you thing. Becoming a Usurper does sound kind of fun. I should ask Carmen if we can make this thing with Valhal official and unite to take down the evil snake god and his cult."

"Not a cult, it's an Order, big difference," Villy said jokingly before turning a bit more serious. *"But you know what? If I do end up falling, feel free to usurp whatever you can. Take every scrap of Records you can get and put it to good use."*

"When you say shit like that, it makes it really fucking hard not to ask if you really got this handled," Jake said with a sigh as he prompted the Viper to continue. "What's the big final twist, then? How are we going to reveal that we bamboozled Yip of Yore and Ell'Hakan all along before crushing them both with their power weakened from breaking their narrative?"

"Ah, you see, that's the neatest part of all this; we won't. At least you won't do anything like that while Yip of Yore remains alive," the Viper said.

"... isn't that the point of all this?" Jake asked, now genuinely confused. "To make Ell'Hakan and Yip of Yore believe in some false narrative that we can then show has been manufactured by us, making them look like complete and utter morons while weakening them in the process as their story falls apart?"

"Now, where would you possibly get such a misunderstanding from? Not to say you can't do that when I have handled Yip – which honestly will probably end up happening by default as naturally the story will fall apart with his death – but you can lean further into it if you want," Villy answered. "But, no, the plan isn't to ruin his narrative. It's to empower it."

"You want Yip to grow stronger?" Jake asked. Sure, he was all for making opponents harder to beat to get a good challenge out of it, but the Viper hadn't struck him as that kind of person...

"That is indeed exactly what I want," Villy confirmed. "Also, I would like to point out that revealing the story is bullshit in some big plot twist likely wouldn't even work that well. Yip of Yore's Path isn't as fragile as that, as the stories he creates become almost... sticky. It would take time for things to unravel, and chances are he would be able to counter any plot twist we tried to introduce by simply claiming he knew all along and had planned for it. While such a lie could be seen through with some scrutiny, in the final stages, there's no time for such scrutiny."

"But getting stronger is easy or what?" Jake questioned, feeling like that bullshitter's abilities were really way too damn overpowered.

"Yep, it is. Especially when he already has the narrative momentum. Right now, I'm nothing but an unreliable narrator in his discourse, meaning all my words are automatically doubted, while his are believed by default. He has the prerogative to make use of anything we give him, and he does genuinely believe you are unsatisfied with me and not at all faithful. However, even if he didn't actually believe any of the bullshit we feed him, he would still actively make use of it and do what he can to convince it's the truth, as that will only benefit him," the Viper continued explaining.

"That's part of why all this scheming even works. Yip wants to believe, and benefits from believing anything that makes him look better and this little Viper look worse. Be it lies or us trying to trick him, he will still gladly take advantage, having confidence in his own

Path. In the end, it all comes down to who stands victorious in the end. The truth no longer matters when a victor is decided. As the saying goes, history is written by the winner... so Yip of Yore just has to win, and even the lies he knew we manufactured will become truth if he says they are."

"You know, I'm beginning to wonder... what exactly are you getting out of all this?" Jake asked, having wondered this for a while. "Why do you want him to grow stronger?"

"Now that is a great question and one I'm sure Yip is even wondering... but let's not ruin the ending of this story, alright? Spoiling isn't nice."

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Chapter 996: Nothing Ever Goes Fully According To Plan

Jake still had a lot of questions regarding the Viper's plan, and even if the snake god didn't want to share the ending, there were plenty of potential problems in the middle of this act. Primarily was what would happen to everyone else around Jake.

It wasn't hard for Jake to lean into the plan alone, but if he did, others were bound to get involved. Miranda was blessed by the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon and has shown no indications of being a heretic herself, so she obviously wouldn't continue to back Jake if he betrayed the Viper, right? The most update novels are published on novel•

Also, what about all the other people who were backing Jake precisely because he had the backing of the Viper? What about the galactic conflict that was going on? Was the plan to just flop over and let Ell'Hakan win? Because while he did feel like he owed the Viper a favor, he wasn't willing to do something like that, which would end up hurting those close to him.

So, naturally, he asked the Primordial, who shared his thoughts:

"You are correct; that is a conundrum. You also need to consider all the people who came to Earth because you are my Chosen. For you to – at least in their minds – suddenly turn your back on your Patron can't be a good look and will cause a lot of internal discord. But I have considered it, which is where I'll have to ask you something that is a bit of a gamble, but the best solution in my mind: tell them the truth. At least a version of the truth."

Jake was back to frowning. "Elaborate."

"Inform them everything you're doing is part of the Malefic Viper's schemes and that you are working together to deceive Ell'Hakan, Yip of Yore, and Valhal. At the same time, tell the opposite to Valhal and Ell'Hakan. However, and this is the important part, only show evidence of your claim to one side. Ell'Hakan and his people will be cautious, but the moment you turn on your aura of a heretic all such doubt should instantly vanish. From there, just stay away from your allies. Ell'Hakan will no doubt spread the word you have turned full heretic, but with information and travel still restricted for the most part, everything will be over by the time those on Earth can be convinced you turned heretic," the Viper continued, as things were definitely getting complicated again with this plan.

"Alright... alright, I think we can do that," Jake said after thinking a bit. "I just want to make sure I don't cause too much trouble or confusion during this time."

"Believe in the people you have around you. You've assembled a good team of supporters, and if nothing else, the swordsman, witch, and others can handle matters for you. You also have a True Royal on your side; remember that. As long as she stays on Earth, no one dares try anything there. People are already making a lot of enemies in these times, no need to piss off the Endless Empire on top of everything else," the Viper semi-joked.

"Speaking of huge factions... what the fuck are we doing about the Holy Church?" Jake asked, bringing up another thing he had been worried about. "I assume all the other factions, such as the Court of Shadows, will sit on the sidelines and not get involved, but the Church is very obviously making their move. As things are, I can't reasonably not do something to defend the allies I made to face Ell'Hakan and the Church... will me defending them be a problem?"

"Firstly, the neutral factions shall remain neutral, so don't worry about them. As for the Holy Church, they are kind of a package deal with Ell'Hakan in this, so if you want to stop the attacks of one, you have to stop both, and at the same time, if you stop one, the other should follow suit. However, rather than fight, have you considered going the route of diplomacy?"

"Not sure they are interested in peace with Earth," Jake muttered, taking into consideration all they had been doing over the last day or so to destabilize the Milky Way Galaxy and gain ground. What they were doing right now was the opposite of diplomacy.

"With Earth? Probably not. So don't negotiate as Earth. Remember what the plan is, you're about to abandon the Order of the Malefic Viper and join Valhal. It isn't premature to leverage them a bit, now is it? With Valhal at your side, force through a truce where each party keeps their territories for now, both sides backing off until the conflict between Yip of Yore and I is resolved. Ell'Hakan certainly has faith in his Patron's victory, so this will only benefit him as he will only grow stronger during this process."

Plus, it will only make him look good that he successfully helped bring you to the side of Valhal; at least, I'm sure he will take partial credit. Meanwhile the Holy Church is certain to also want this truce. This will only put a pause on the war, sure, but if all things go well, you will get your chance to end it instantly once I've had my fill of Yip of Yore. At that point, you should also be able to limit losses as the enemy won't be in a good state."

"Minor problem there. Are you sure the people from Valhal will just be fine with all this? Sounds like I'm actually screwing them over quite a bit, using them to pressure the Holy Church when it's all based on a lie. Could cause them some trouble, couldn't it?" Jake questioned.

"Nah, it's fine, don't think too much about it. The Holy Church wants a truce and to limit fighting right now. They'll be on board and even push for it if you propose it first, trust me. You also shouldn't concern yourself about anything with Valhal. They won't complain either," the Viper said with a lot of confidence.

Jake couldn't help but ask when he heard how sure the Viper was: "Say... I get that Valhal is kind of in on the plan to some extent, but do you also have the Holy Church in-the-know or what? Because they sure aren't acting like they are."

"No, they are not. But they are led by the Holy Mother, a fellow Primordial I have known for way too long. I know how they operate. They definitely have their own reasons for taking part in this conflict, and it shouldn't be anything that negatively interferes with this little scheme," Villy said, remaining as confident as before.

A few more seconds passed as Jake was thinking, looking for more questions and concerns he may have. One did spring to mind:

"What do you expect me to tell the others here on Earth? Not the random World Leaders and the people in the alliance, but people like the Sword Saint, Carmen, Sylphie, Miranda, and so on. They're going to be confused as fuck even if I do tell them the truth, especially if they know I had the aura of a heretic. I haven't exactly shared that I'm a Heretic-Chosen with anyone," Jake said, not a fan of that part of this entire thing. The only people he wasn't really worried about were his parents as they quite frankly didn't care about all this and were more considered part of the Court than Jake's faction, so they shouldn't be a problem. But the others could prove problematic.

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"Honestly? I'll leave that to you. All I will ask is to not make them get directly involved with anything like the negotiations. Keep them on Earth. Maybe even use that as a bargaining chip during negotiations. Promise to have all your strongest assets remain on Earth until the matter is concluded. As for your concerns of them looking at you weirdly after all this is done... well, pretty sure they already look at you like the little freak you are, but I already planned on informing everyone I was behind you faking to

be a heretic. It really shouldn't be a problem if your friends don't bring on the trouble," Villy explained.

"I can't make any promises that they don't have their own intentions," Jake muttered. "And I'm not going to put myself in a situation where I might end up fighting friends to sell a lie."

"If all things go well, you won't have to fight anyone besides Ell'Hakan, and even that will be entirely your prerogative," the Viper assured Jake. "I'm sure that if you've built any rapport, they will trust you over the rumors that are spreading. Finally, many of them are blessed by Primordials, and they really should be considered neutral parties and not part of your faction in the first place. You seemingly joining hands with Valhal shouldn't really change their relationship with you, either. They are your comrades because you are fellow Earthlings or have some other personal bond, not because you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Nothing in my plan requires you to insinuate you will give up control of Earth. In fact, it can even be sold that you are forging a stronger alliance through Valhal than you had with the Order if they have their own smaller factions to convince. Either way, as I said, trust them to handle things on their end as long as you inform them of the basics of the plan. I'm not claiming everything will end perfectly, but I do believe the end result will be satisfactory."

"Right," Jake nodded slowly. "Not gonna lie, all of this is still kind of vague, and there are a lot of elements I'm not clear on if will work out, so let's try to be a bit more tangible. What exactly do you want me to do once I leave here?"

"Talk to those you fully trust and no one else. I'll leave who you inform to your discretion. Follow their advice to carry out the plan, and have them handle most things here on Earth. But before that, spend the next day or so with the Runemaiden, preferably away from everyone else and without them knowing what you're up to, while, of course, making sure Ell'Hakan's spies know where you are. After that, go out alone and make the announcement you are acting like you ally with Valhal to get one over Yip of Yore to the people on Earth. Shortly after, leave the planet to the one Valhal currently controls. The Runemaiden will know which one. Once there, simply follow the plan and act like you are done with my shit and want to jump ship. The Runemaiden is the person with the highest level of authority in your galaxy, so with her, there should be no pushback in getting what you want, and it's not like anyone would question the guy that Valdemar tried to personally recruit at Nevermore. Especially not after you showed off that you have taken inspiration from his Path as a fighter. With them, negotiate peace, and from there, the initial time pressure should be eliminated, and things calm down until they escalate on my end," Villy said, really laying it out in an easy-to-understand fashion. **R**

Jake leaned his head back, looking toward the ceiling of the room he had isolated himself in as he considered everything. In truth, Jake kind of wanted to just reject all this, go to Arnold, and ask him to teleport himself and anyone who wants to join him straight to Ell'Hakan's homeworld to try and kill the Chosen.

However, he knew he couldn't fuck up the Viper's plans and be selfish. Also, he didn't even know if his ambush would work. Shit, he didn't even know if Ell'Hakan was on his homeworld in the first place. So, rather than voice these thoughts, he wondered out loud when he could finally make his own move and end all this. "How long do you reckon this will all take?"

"Now, that is a question I cannot confidently give an answer to. Ultimately, it isn't my decision when Yip of Yore decides it's time to directly attack me, but I believe your actions can speed it up. Also, I have a hard time imagining he will not take advantage the second you seemingly turn into a full heretic, and it will definitely happen before your universe fully opens up once more, as when that happens, the ninety-third universe will once more attract a lot of attention that he is right now very much enjoying. But be aware it will be a while. He is still building momentum with the war against the Order, and he is slowly encircling us and building his base of allies. Gods haven't even gotten involved yet, but when they do, you know we are truly in the endgame," the Viper responded. *"But, if you need me to guess on a timeline... things should be over within the next few months. I can't see it go above half a year."*

"I honestly imagined it would take away fucking longer," Jake frowned. "Don't wars between huge divine factions and gods usually last a long-ass time?"

"They do, but Yip of Yore is not looking to have an actual war but a display of power. Plus, think of the audience. Won't they get bored if things drag out too much and there isn't enough action? You can only drag out narrative escalation for so long before people just get tired of it and just want to see the resolution already. We aren't quite there yet, and Yip of Yore still has more attention to grasp and power to gather, but his momentum is rapidly approaching the crescendo."

"So, to summarize all this shit... I will make people on Earth think I'm going along with your plans while convincing Ell'Hakan and his goons of the opposite, travel with Carmen to the neutral Valhal planet, and use Valhal as a way to establish a temporary truce, showing me and Ell'Hakan are negotiating in good faith. Then, I will stay there for a while while shit escalates on your end until I will unleash my heretic aura, dealing you another blow and hopefully starting the final confrontation. Assuming you handle things on your end, Ell'Hakan will more likely than not find himself scrambling, his alliance crumbling, and I will take this opportunity to isolate and kill him before he has a chance to muster a proper response. I got all this right?" Jake asked, trying to catch the essence of the plan, ignoring all the minor details and adding on a bit of personal interpretation at the end, as there was no way this was gonna end without Jake taking his shot at Ell'Hakan.

"Yeah, that seems to sum it up pretty nicely," the Viper agreed.

"You are fully aware *something*, no, several things in this entire scheme will go horribly wrong, and shit is bound to hit the fan, right?" Jake asked. "Too many damn factors to just expect everything to go according to plan."

“Nothing ever goes fully according to plan, which is why the best plans are those that aren’t overly strict and can be adapted on-the-fly. Usually, that is. This one is a bit more robust, though, as we don’t truly rely on actually tricking Yip of Yore in every aspect. Even if he was fully aware of this entire conversation, he would still lean into our lie, as it would only benefit him to do so,” Villy said. *“Ell’Hakan, maybe not, but I’m sure you can handle that guy while I handle divine business. They have a lot of gaps in knowledge, and the absurdity of your state as a Heretic-Chosen is something no one could have accounted for, so we do have some big advantages.”*

“I guess,” Jake shrugged. “As long as you beat Yip of Yore, everything should be fine.”

“Yeah, so let’s hope I didn’t accidentally miscalculate and make him too strong.”

“... I thought you said I shouldn’t worry, and you got him handled?” Jake muttered, concerned.

“You’re the one who brought up nothing ever going according to plan first.”

“Well, yeah, but-“

“So you would have been the one to jinx me and would have to live with the knowledge you were the primary cause of the downfall of a Primordial,” Villy continued, clearly teasing him... though Jake still couldn’t help but be worried.

Yip of Yore was powerful, and now, the Viper was seemingly trying to make him as powerful as he possibly could. Jake wasn’t sure why, even if he had some theories, but no matter, there had to be a reason why Yip had the confidence to go for a Primordial in the first place, right?

Yeah... things should be fine. Jake just had to focus on his own side of things and not worry about the Viper. Not like the things Jake had to do would be easy, and he seriously hoped the others back at the Prima Vessel would be able to help him sell all the bullshit he was about to peddle.

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- Chapter 997: Something Stupid (?)

Chapter 997: Something Stupid (?)

Jake and Villy continued speaking for a good while more, discussing some additional details of what Jake's role would be in all this. He felt like an actor having a role way beyond his skill level put upon him, and he felt a lot of pressure to carry things out properly as the Viper wanted him to.

Acting and Jake were two things that really didn't go well together, and the Viper at least took this into account and did so that Jake needed to do as little acting as possible. Moreover, this acting would nearly exclusively be done in front of people who didn't really know him in the first place, making it far harder to detect any discrepancies in his actions.

They both also knew all this was for the Viper and had little to do with Jake's own goals or Path. Jake was fine with just teleporting right now and attacking Ell'Hakan wherever he was, and the only reason he held back and would agree to any of this was because Villy was the one asking him to. Sure, Jake did excuse himself for going along with everything by arguing he owed the Viper a favor, but honestly, it was more than that. UPDATE FROM **novel** *fire* **net**

Time and time again, Villy had helped Jake without asking for anything in return. He'd given him access to far more resources than Jake could possibly use: knowledge gathered by the Order since the very first era, personal guidance... so many things. And for that, he'd never asked Jake to do anything Jake wouldn't have ended up wanting to do anyway.

Jake didn't count his exploits and performances during system events as favors to Villy. All those were just Jake being Jake, and the fact it benefitted the Viper because Jake was his Chosen was just a bonus. Counting these would just feel wrong.

At the same time, Jake didn't want to be the kind of person who counted favors between friends and made their relationship transactional... but that didn't mean he couldn't feel the clear disparity in how much one party helped the other. The best comparison Jake could make was with holiday gifts. Sure, gifts were not meant to be seen as transactions, and one wasn't meant to count monetary value between what two friends gave each other... but if Jake gave someone a damn toaster and they gave him a new laptop, he would feel really awkward about it.

So, even if the Viper didn't care – and kept saying he didn't care – about the disparity in how much they helped each other, this was an opportunity for Jake to at least feel less awkward about things. Oh yeah, and helping out the god was also just something a friend would do, as while the sacrifices Jake had to make were annoying, they weren't significant at all.

Finishing their conversation, Jake felt as ready as could be to carry out the plan and try to bring the others on board. It wouldn't be easy, but he was determined to do his darndest. Before they cut the connection, Jake did have one last thing to say, though.

“Hey, Villy?”

“Got more questions?” the god asked.

“No, no, I’m good... I just want to make sure we’re on the same page here. This all ends with us both walking away whole and better than ever, right?” Jake asked.

“And what do you mean by that?”

“That you aren’t going to do something stupid,” Jake said in a rather stern tone.

“Duly noted, but truly, you have no reason to worry... still, thanks for the concern, I guess,” the Viper said, seemingly not entirely sure how to respond.

“That’s what friends are for,” Jake shrugged before smiling. “Now, let’s go pull off the scam of the era.”

“Yeah, no, that’s never gonna happen,” Carmen said, her arms crossed as she stood in front of the golden projection.

“The feelings of mortals are transient, and no one truly knows the future. Assume it does happen, and take into account that I’m not asking you to ensure it happens now but that you merely lay the groundwork for the future. Do not act as if you wouldn’t prefer if he joined,” Gudrun spoke through the projection.

“Sure, that would be pretty cool, but I’m also fine if it doesn’t. It’s not like our respective factions will have fuck-all effect on things once all this stuff is over,” Carmen said, a bit annoyed at everything going on. “Can I also finally talk about everything once it’s done?”

“No, not for a good while. You would know that if you’d read the contract properly,” Gudrun said in a scolding yet motherly tone as she smiled. “Not like you would have rejected signing it no matter what had been included. Curiosity truly will be the downfall of mankind.” RA

“Can’t blame me for being curious when interesting stuff is going down in my own home galaxy,” Carmen smiled, preferring the casual tone of the conversation over the usual stiffness she had to adopt when interacting with gods in a more public setting.

Like Jake, she had gone to have a personal discussion with her Patron when Jake had. Rather than get Valdemar, she had ended up talking to Gudrun – which was honestly standard by now – and had begun this discussion. Her ritual for contact was to summon a projection like this, using a rather expensive item as a catalyst, as well as making use of her Divine Blessing, as a lower one wouldn’t allow this kind of thing.

As for what Gudrun wanted... well, as most times, it was related to Jake. More accurately, Jake, the Malefic Viper, and everything else currently going on, including the entire clash happening in the rest of the multiverse. Gudrun didn't disclose much, perhaps because she didn't know much, but things weren't looking good for the Order of the Malefic Viper.

Gudrun didn't seem overly worried, though. However, she did view this as an opportunity. She proposed to Carmen to take Jake to the planet in the Milky Way under the total control of Valhal and use that neutral ground to try and find a solution with Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church.

Carmen saw no way in hell Jake would be interested in going the diplomatic route. Maybe Miranda would try and convince him to try something like that, but she was pretty damn confident not even she could talk him out of just recklessly charging at Ell'Hakan to put an arrow in his skull.

Still, Gudrun seemed convinced he would be open to diplomacy. Assuming she was correct and Jake would come to the planet ruled by Valhal, Gudrun wanted Carmen to naturally come along. Once there, Jake would know no one except Carmen, and while he could certainly entertain himself, Gudrun believed this was a great opportunity to see the good things about Valhal and use the place to train.

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The plan was obviously to try and convince Jake that Valhal was a cool faction and totally one he should join. Even if it wasn't now, then in the future, he should consider them. If not, then at least he should have a very favorable view of Valhal and be willing to work closely with them going forward, perhaps even becoming an honorable member or something dumb like that.

Or, perhaps Gudrun was thinking on a far longer timeframe than that... because there was a great precedent for mortals switching factions upon ascending to godhood, going elsewhere if another place fit them better than where they currently were.

The part about the contract was related to something Carmen had pretty much felt forced to sign a long time ago. It was related to all the shady bullshit going on, and to ensure she wouldn't spill the beans, Gudrun had her sign it shortly before Nevermore. All it did was make Carmen unable to talk about certain things when around others, with a few people excluded.

Carmen didn't like it, as she felt herself clamp up at times, the words just not coming out when she was accidentally about to say something she shouldn't... so maybe the contract was a good idea? She wasn't sure, honestly. At least she could get out of the contract at any point if she wanted by just taking off the ring she had been given, which

was what restricted her from speaking on accident, though she had a feeling doing that wouldn't end well for her.

Either way, the contract meant that Carmen knew a lot more than others. Walking around with secret knowledge did feel kind of cool, especially considering this knowledge was the kind not even shared with other gods. Carmen was one of the very few people who knew certain facts, such as that Valhal and the Order weren't truly in a conflict and that Valdemar and the Malefic Viper had their own deal.

However... she also knew that it was true Valdemar and Yip of Yore had one too. One that did obligate Valdemar and Valhal to assist Yip of Yore in suppressing the Order and facilitate the clash between Yip and the Viper.

Which did kind of make Carmen wonder one thing.

"I kind of get the gist that the Malefic Viper wants to fight Yip of Yore... but what if he loses? Will Valhal step in and help the Viper?" Carmen asked after a while, as she really couldn't imagine a world where anyone wanted that Yip guy to win. She didn't expect an answer but surprisingly got one.

"We will not do any such thing. The result of the fight between the Malefic One and Yip of Yore is entirely on them. No one from Valhal will interfere. In fact, we will ensure no one interferes, no matter what," Gudrun said with certainty.

"So if the Viper loses...?" Carmen asked, frowning.

"He dies, and the first Primordial falls, truly giving rise to Yip of Yore and a new being recognized as at least equal to the other surviving Primordials," Gudrun answered, still in her matter-of-fact tone.

"And Valhal is okay with that?"

"Okay with it? Why do you think Valdemar is willing to help Yip of Yore in the first place?" Gudrun said with a smile. ***"He recognized Yip of Yore has the potential to reach the peak. Valdemar wants nothing more than to have someone willing to battle and worth fighting, and if this conflict gives him that, why wouldn't he be okay with it?"***

Carmen wanted to comment more but kept quiet. She had to admit she never really understood what kind of relationship Valhal and the Order had, nor what exactly was going on between the Viper and her own Patron. She didn't know if they were friends, enemies, rivals, or just two really old creatures who didn't have some set description for their odd and complicated relationship.

"Anyway, all you want me to do is bring Jake away from Earth and to our planet?" Carmen asked, clarifyingly, changing the topic.

“Precisely. I’m sure he can handle everything else from there. Just play along with him and back up whatever he does, but don’t personally get involved in any battle should the animosity between the two Chosen proves too much,” Gudrun said. ***“Oh, and do not under any circumstances make direct contact with the Chosen of Yip of Yore.”***

“I know, I know,” Carmen waved her off. “I wouldn’t want to anyway. Imagining someone fucking with my emotions just feels so damn icky.”

“It does appear rather unsettling, but some would be more than happy to have the power granted by such a Bloodline in their arsenal,” Gudrun said in her usual cryptic tone as the summoned projection flickered a few times. ***“It appears our time is up. May you complete your mission well, Runemaiden; we have confidence in you.”***

The image faded away, the catalyst she’d used to summon it, having run out of energy. The act of projecting a god in this fashion definitely wasn’t an easy matter or something one simply did. Sometimes, she was envious of Jake, who seemingly had the ability to talk to his Patron at all times without having to do any prep work or set up any rituals, but then again, she was totally fine with not having the kind of pressure on her that would bring.

Sighing loudly, Carmen rolled her shoulders, feeling the stiffness come out as it only now was clear how tense she had been. Just Gudrun’s projection was unsettling to deal with on some deep instinctual level, and the only reason Carmen could even act normal was because of the resistance she’d built up from being close to Jake. Mortals simply weren’t built to interact with gods, especially not for prolonged periods of time, and most certainly not while still only in C-grade.

Should get back to the Prima Vessel... I still can’t see Jake agreeing to go the diplomacy route and negotiating with that manipulate emotion-fucking shitbag.

The land that had slowly begun to recover after the battle between powerful beings was rapidly meeting its end once more. Color had faded as the vast plains had its newly-grown grass, weeds, and any form of life wilt away whenever the desolation spread further, a mass of odd energy in its center. This odd mass came from a small fragment that appeared to house the remnants of the False God that had once been... and was soon to be once more.

No one had come to this planet in a long time, at least not before that day. Earth did have talks of sending someone to see if they could find proof the Desolate Child of Loss had survived or was truly dead, but had been reluctant in case the False God was there and still lived, making such a mission incredibly risky.

Yet now, a lone figure walked through the plains toward the land of desolation. Even as he reached the border where the world turned monochrome, and desolation ruled, he did not stop but kept walking dauntless forward.

Instantly, the desolation attacked, yet the man appeared utterly unaffected. He was like a beacon of light and color in a dead world as each step took him closer to the epicenter and cause of the desolation. Even as he got closer and the desolation grew in power and intensity, he remained untouched and unfaltering, and soon enough, he stood before the fragment on the ground.

For several seconds, he merely stood there, staring down at it. He made no motions or moves but simply existed within the desolation as he seemingly evaluated the fragment. Minutes passed, and faint echoes of mana could be felt from the man as he was clearly doing *something*, clearly not in any kind of rush.

After nearly half an hour, he seemed done. Nodding, he muttered to himself as he'd reached a conclusion.

Kneeling down, he scooped up the fragment in his hand, carefully cradling it with his palms. The desolation instantly invaded his body but once more found itself struggling against the man. He muttered once more as he kept kneeling there, just holding the fragment of desolation. Faint energies entered the fragment originating from his body as he kept speaking in a soft tone, the minutes passing by slowly within this world where the only color was the man.

Then, something surprising happened. The energy of desolation began to slowly weaken. It stopped attacking the man holding it and at the edges of the land being made desolate, stopped expanding entirely. Then, it, too, began to retract, the man continuing to speak.

Hours passed as the desolation became lesser and lesser until, finally, nearly all of it had merged back into the fragment. The fragment had also changed, now resembling a heart that looked a lot like that of a human's but clearly wasn't.

Satisfied, the man took out a small box, and as he continued to speak softly, he put the heart within the box. With a final smile, he closed the lid, the desolation all around fading entirely. Standing up, the man turned toward the Prima Vessel far in the distance and began walking again, holding the chest closely, cradled like the lost child it was.

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Chapter 998: Great Minds Think Alike

“So, the plan is to go the diplomacy route and negotiate with the fucker before putting an arrow through his skull,” Jake finished his explanation to the room of people he trusted the most. They all stared back at him for a few moments before Miranda spoke.

“This is all... a lot. So far, all our plans have been to find a way to use Ell’Hakan to weaken Yip of Yore, but the Viper wants us to do the opposite? I’ve heard nothing of this from the Verdant Witches,” Miranda said with much concern.

“Are you confident you can carry out the tasks your Patron gave you?” the Sword Saint asked, having also thought over everything. “You will need something to convince Ell’Hakan you are being genuine and not trying to trick him. A good story is but the bare minimum, and you need to have swift replies to all imaginable questions, as you will no doubt end up talking to him directly.”

While Jake had shared the Viper’s plan with those in the room but left out some parts, specifically those related to his own secrets. He didn’t mention anything about him being a Heretic-Chosen, nor did he bring up the fact he’d absorbed a drop of blood from the Viper. All of those things weren’t something he should be sharing, but they were also vital aspects of the plan. All of this is to say that Jake understood the old man’s concern, but he nodded confidently in affirmation to assure the man a little things would be fine.

“I believe I got this handled, and you are right. I will need a very good story and to have thought everything through. Trust me, the Viper already grilled me on this.”

“If you say so,” the Sword Saint said, not showing a lot of trust in Jake’s social skills.

The others in the room, namely Sylphie, Vesperia, Arnold, and Carmen, weren’t saying much but just listened in. Carmen hadn’t been someone Jake had initially planned on including in this meeting due to her relations with Valhal, but he’d met her on the way back to the Vessel after she’d also spoken to Gudrun. She already knew a lot of the plot going on, and since Jake would have to leave with her later anyway, he saw no reason not to include her.

William had been a potential participant, but Jake still didn’t trust him enough. He also didn’t know enough about Eversmile to know if the god could use his former connection with William to spy on them, so he decided to just play it safe and not include the guy. As for other notable absentees, nearly all of them were excluded on purpose due to the factions they belonged to or because they had been busy doing other stuff. Sandy had left to eat some stuff, Lillian was busy, and he hadn’t even tried to talk to Kindroth as the elf had left to handle other matters a while ago.

"To make it clear, you want us to function as your propaganda machine here on Earth, advertising that you are tricking Ell'Hakan into an alliance while actually just taking advantage of him, yet at the same time purposefully make undercurrents of doubt within the upper echelon of Earth's leadership if you truly are just performing a scheme. This undercurrent will naturally be leaked to Ell'Hakan, creating plenty of ambiguity about where your loyalties truly lie, and with some evidence you and the Viper planned for, hopefully, convince him to bite and actually believe you are intending to leave the Malefic Viper and permanently join hands with Valhal?" Miranda tried to sum up everything Jake had asked of them, hitting the nail on the head as expected and making Jake nod enthusiastically.

"Yep, pretty much," Jake said with a smile.

"That's not gonna be easy," the Sword Saint frowned. "A lot of local actors will try to take advantage of the confusion to cause discord. I'm also not sure our allies will be on board. Even if we tell them it's all part of the Viper's plan, they are in contact with the rest of the multiverse and are aware of what's happening. They know the Order of the Malefic Viper is being crushed and has been for months now. Trying to convince them all of this is the Viper's plan is a ridiculous ask."

"You don't need to convince them for a long time... just long enough for a truce to be established and both sides back down," Jake tried to argue. "Also, you don't have a relationship with the Order of the Malefic Viper, so what if you act like you know I'm actually planning on switching sides and also deceiving Miranda to-"

"Won't work," the old man shut him down instantly. "We need to keep presenting a strong united front. If we begin to display any fractures in our core power base, many will jump ship and join the Holy Church and Ell'Hakan. The only reason many remain loyal is because of the power we wield. While the Church and Ell'Hakan have made moves on many planets, they have clearly acted with restraint, and restraint often comes from caution. It's believed that they are wary of Earth and our elites, and the fact many believe we would win a direct confrontation in an all-out war is the sole reason our alliance can even remain."

Jake frowned a bit as he thought of something else, but before he had a chance to, the Sword Saint continued.

"You are also incorrect when you say the Noboru Clan has no relations with the Order of the Malefic Viper. While it's true that there's nothing official, my clan has embraced the Path of vampirism. That will automatically make us be viewed as enemies by the Holy Church and many other factions, meaning should we stand alone, we are nothing but a target to be exterminated. However, if we are allies with the Order of the Malefic Viper, which is the only large multiversal organization publicly allowing vampires in it, we are under heavy protection simply by association. Oh yes, it's also no secret several members of the clan have gone to the Order either, meaning most assume we are pretty much already a minor branch of the Order."

“Suddenly showing internal strife will also raise a lot of suspicion as we all seemed so united before,” Miranda said. “We also don’t know the kind of information Ell’Hakan has, so complicating things further by adding more misdirection or schemes will only make us look like we’re acting out of character. No, better to just fully lean into us actually believing in what you are saying. To frame ourselves as not even able to consider the possibility that you are willing to betray the Malefic Viper, or, perhaps we are just hoping so dearly it isn’t the case that we are willing to look past many suspicious actions as the alternative would be something we simply couldn’t handle.”

Jake slowly nodded as Carmen asked:

“How about Vesperia, Sylphie, and Arnold?” she questioned. “What will they do?”

“Nothing,” Miranda said, looking at Arnold who seemed interested enough in the conversation to take part, as he shrugged.

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“This entire matter has little consequence to me. Should the ruler of Earth be part of the Order of the Malefic Viper or Valhal will not impact me in any meaningful way,” he explained. ¶

“I echo the sentiment,” Vesperia said. “The Endless Empire would be neutral in either case, thus, I would see no cause to even comment on it, outside of saying that I follow my Sire’s decisions.”

“Ree,” Sylphie said, making it absolutely clear she had little understanding and interest in everything that was going on and was only participating in this meeting because everyone else was there, and she would have felt left out if she hadn’t also taken part.

It was good she was there as Jake had been thinking: “How about we bring Sylphie with us to Valhal? Won’t that communicate my trust in Valhal by bringing her along?”

“I can’t see it negatively impact anything,” Miranda had no complaints. “May even be good as she can’t leak anything accidentally here on Earth. Ah, but it would be best if Vesperia stays on Earth. As a True Royal, her presence will-

“- help defend the planet and make others hesitate to take any actions here directly lest they piss off the Endless Empire. Yeah, I know,” Jake cut her off and smiled.

“I do find that acceptable,” Vesperia agreed to stay. “I will not involve myself in anything, though. I do not wish to take part in this conflict in any way if it can be avoided, and will only defend myself and what is mine if forced to.”

"We expect nothing more," Miranda nodded, as she looked to have a lot of thoughts swimming around in her head. "I think the biggest challenge will be to convince those you already know... people like Kindroth won't be easily fooled and may even end up seeing through the scheme with his close proximity to everything."

"But we aren't really fooling him, now are we?" the Sword Saint smiled. "We are simply following the Malefic Viper's plan. If he believes he sees through the disguised truth and arrives at a lie, that isn't our fault but only shows a lack of trust in our and Jake's word. In fact, this entire thing can serve as a nice method to weed out those who are only opportunistic and have no real loyalty to Earth."

"True, but can we really afford to lose more allies?" Miranda asked, unsure.

"My question would be if they can afford having lost us as allies after Ell'Hakan falls. It doesn't matter how big the Church or Ell'Hakan gets. As long as the other Chosen falls, they lose their ability to defend the galaxy. I refuse to believe the Church will oppose us without his involvement. No, they would rather just evacuate or negotiate to avoid fighting as losing believers is only detrimental to them," the Sword Saint said.

Jake could see the gears spin in the old man's head as he looked ready to take advantage of the situation. There was something assuring about that, and Jake felt that the Viper had been right... he should trust the people around him to handle this situation and focus on his own role.

He had noticed how none of them had questioned if they should do the plan at all. They had all instantly just agreed and pointed out potential issues with the goal of looking for solutions. Never once had it even been seen as an option to not go along with what Jake and the Viper had proposed. He had nothing but gratefulness for their support and knew that the best way to pay them back was to ensure that this entire mess had a satisfactory solution.

From this point onwards in the meeting, Jake just had to sit back and let the smart people talk, and surprisingly, they agreed on nearly everything. Great minds think alike and all that. He only occasionally had to answer some clarifying questions before the two of them dove straight back into their discussion. As Miranda and the Sword Saint had quickly taken charge and began discussing everything they would do, Jake threw Carmen a knowing glance, getting one in return. It was a tough life being the kind of person who solved everything with a punch or arrow to the face, but Jake definitely didn't envy the two.

Soon enough, there really wasn't more to say, and it wasn't as if Miranda couldn't get in touch with Jake after he left that day. The Sword Saint seemed almost excited by everything that was about to happen, especially when it was made clear he would be allowed to exert some pressure using his power should the negotiations prove in any way problematic. Jake being able to control the old man wouldn't be realistic, after all, should anyone cross the line or not honor a truce.

Miranda only had some encouraging words to Jake as Carmen and Jake prepared to head to Jake's lodge just the two of them. As the Viper had said, they should be seen together going there and leaving again in a day or so. Considering the number of spies keeping an eye on the lodge at all times, especially now with everything going on in the Milky Way and the multiverse, this was bound to raise some questions, especially when it was later discussed among the top brass that Jake had left Earth with Carmen.

"Jake, remember, keep everything as simple as you can. Don't try to overcomplicate and overthink things. Don't act as you wouldn't normally act, and channel some of what you're feeling right now. You hate stupid schemes, and you hate shit that's made complex just for the sake of it," Miranda said. "You're not trying to trick anyone, and you are just selfishly looking out for yourself. Nothing more, nothing less. Remember to always put your personal interests first and foremost, and try not to include any of us in your considerations, alright?"

"Pretty sure that's shitty advice to give someone you want to be a decent person... but sure," Jake smiled at her. Miranda gave him a smile and a nod in return and looked at Carmen.

"I would ask you to make sure he doesn't mess stuff up or get into more trouble when with you... but I have the feeling you wouldn't even try to stop him but instead go along with his antics if it seemed fun."

"Guilty as charged," Carmen shrugged with a grin.

"Ree!"

"I know we can always count on you," the Sword Saint shook his head with a smile at Sylphie's confident screech that she would make sure Jake and Carmen were on their best behavior.

They spoke a bit longer before Carmen and Jake left, leaving the rest behind in the Prima Vessel. The two of them teleported back to Haven, where he instantly felt some gazes upon him and Carmen. This was why he usually preferred to use stealth when out and about, but this time around, he wanted to be seen, and he had the excuse he was with Carmen for why he wasn't sneaking about.

It didn't take them long to arrive back at the lodge, and once there, all the observers were gone, courtesy of the barriers placed over the valley to keep prying eyes out. Sure, some people could – and had tried in the past – to still sneak in and have a gander, but let's just say things tended not to end well for them once caught. Because they always got caught.

Once inside the lodge, Jake sighed loudly as he practically threw himself down on a chair. "This is going to be fucking exhausting... already is."

“You’re the one who agreed to it,” Carmen shrugged. “Can’t say I complain that much. It’s not like my job is hard, and I’m making my Patron and Valhal very happy just hanging out with you for a bit. Honestly easy as fuck, and I don’t need to consider how I’m acting. It’s not a secret I don’t like Ell’Hakan, and this entire thing doesn’t give me a reason to suddenly act like I do.”

“True,” Jake nodded slowly. “Not that I have to suddenly be all buddy-buddy.”

“But you will have to talk to the guy which is more than I would be willing to do without a *lot* of convincing,” Carmen said. “Well, at least you won’t talk to him in person.”

“No one should talk to him in person, ever. He’s a walking public mental health hazard,” Jake said as a matter of fact.

“He does feel like he’s contagious with some mindfuck virus, doesn’t he?” Carmen joked around as she sighed. “Anyway, let’s stop talking about that fucker... we’re meant to stay here, just the two of us, for an entire day without going out or doing anything suspicious.”

“We sure are,” Jake nodded. The source of this content is *novel•fire•net*

Carmen looked at him with a wry smile. “Well... seeing as that’s the case, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“You know, I just might be,” Jake returned her smile.

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Chapter 999: A Day at the Lodge

Carmen forcefully pressed Jake against the wall and pushed her own body onto his with all her weight. Jake responded by elbowing her in the shoulder only because she dodged getting hit in the head, the movement allowing him some leeway before she could headbutt him in the face as he struggled to get free. His blow managed to gain him some space as he quickly jumped away and stabilized, trying to regain momentum.

She pounced on him instantly, Jake escaping her grappling hands that tried to restrain him. He dodged her blows one after another as they swapped who was pushing the other one back constantly, the soft sand beneath them making it difficult to move fast but also allowing them to really get some proper force behind their attacks.

Dodging another swift blow, Jake quickly landed a low kick, making Carmen stumble. However, rather than fall backward, she dove straight into Jake's incoming fist, taking it on the forehead as Jake's knuckle and fingers hurt from the impact. He tried to retract his hand, but she managed to grab his wrist, and in a move Jake felt was out of a movie, she lifted her entire body off the ground and twisted, making Jake fall down alongside her, held in an armbar.

Pain shot through Jake's body as his eyes opened wide because rather than use the move to pressure Jake into giving up, she straight up broke his arm. Probably a good choice as Jake had already determined himself to give it up as he used his legs to get leverage, and despite bending his now broken arm in a painful fashion, he tried to get on top of Carmen.

Sadly for him, she managed to roll away and quickly stand, Jake doing the same as he was forced to. Carmen looked at Jake as he stood there with his arm looking like just a useless slab of flesh. Smiling, she asked triumphantly:

"Wanna keep going?"

"I can still stand," Jake said with a smile, refusing to surrender just yet while he still had the ability to fight ba-

Five minutes later, he had a broken leg and was pretty sure at least one internal organ had entirely given up, and standing wasn't really an option anymore. Carmen stood over him with her arms crossed and a big grin as Jake sighed painfully. "Alright, alright... let's get out of here."

The Colosseum around them faded away as the two of them had their consciousness transported back to their real bodies still within Jake's lodge. They had both been sitting on the floor with legs crossed and opened their eyes at the same time as the emblem Jake held in his hand stopped glowing and powered down.

"That thing is really good stuff... a lot better than the one I got," Carmen commented, not trying to hide her envy.

"Yeah, I probably should have been using it more before," Jake nodded as he looked at the item he'd been rewarded for his performance during the Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon.

[Emblem of the Grand Champion (Mythical)] – An emblem infused with the powers and concepts of the Colosseum of Mortals, given only to those deemed worthy. This Emblem can create a replica of the Colosseum of Mortals arena within a virtual space for individuals to duel one another. Allows the user to choose two targets who must consent to take part in a duel within the virtual space. Those entering will leave their true bodies defenseless during the duel period. All levels and stats of those entering will be normalized. Most skills and

abilities will also be restricted. Dying within the virtual space will have no negative consequences. As the owner, you can always observe the inside of the Emblem of the Grand Champion. Cooldown period: 1 hour.

Requirements: Soulbound

As he said, Jake hadn't really been using the thing, and in truth, he'd only been reminded of it because Carmen brought it up. She'd also gotten her own emblem, but it was a lot worse than Jake's in several ways. First of all it had a cooldown of a full day, which was kind of annoying, but the biggest thing was that Jake had way more options for customization within the Colosseum itself and the rules and restrictions the two people would be fighting under.

He'd been able to make it so that they both had the exact same stats for their many duels. He could also limit equipment and weapons effortlessly, making it a great sparring ground. At least for spars without skills, as most things wouldn't be replicated as the item description said. To many, this could be seen as a negative, but in truth, it was a massive bonus.

It allowed one to train skills without as much system assistance. It was weird, but the system clearly still recognized you had the skill even when in the Colosseum made by the Emblem, yet the assistance was significantly reduced. This meant one could do a lot of new experimenting, and it allowed one to get more familiar with one's skills than during regular practice while offering a new perspective and way to train. Especially if one had to pull off skills with far smaller resource pools and lower stats.

Jake and Carmen had just gone for a few rounds of sparring with close-to-mortal stats, very much akin to how the Colosseum of Mortals had been in Nevermore, but a little more restricted than even that. The two of them had fought with weapons twice, with Jake winning both times handily. However, when they went purely unarmed, he got his ass handed to him every single time, which to Jake was awesome as that proved he had plenty of space to improve. In the same vein, Carmen was also happy she lost to Jake, resulting in the two of them wanting to do the fighting where they were at a disadvantage... while naturally still enjoying their victories.

Of course, after the fights, with Jake and Carmen both fired up from just having fought, everyone knows what would happen next...

Post-match analysis.

"You still get too easily baited into favoring one side over the other, and while you really don't have many openings, if your attacks aren't able to do proper damage and create enough space in their own right for you to retreat, you tend to find yourself in trouble," Carmen criticized him, pointing to a magic whiteboard she had been carrying around all this time and had been great during her stay in the lodge. "Sometimes your attack pattern can also get predictable. You pretty much always aim for vitals spots, which I

get feels natural, but it's also the most obvious. With a weapon, that isn't as much of a problem, but when unarmed, the amount of damage a single blow can deal tends to be limited even if you land a good hit on weak soft tissue."

She made some basic drawings on the board as Jake nodded along. He'd been the one doing presentations after some of the prior fights, pointing out how Carmen tended to rely too much on her tough body after becoming a fully-fledged Runemaiden, which was a problem when fighting in the Colosseum as she obviously wasn't a Runemaiden in there, meaning getting stabbed would actually result in her being stabbed.

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Unlearning bad habits of overreliance on her own toughness was something she seriously needed, as while she was incredibly durable, and Jake struggled to cause any real damage to her in a real fight, she was far from invincible. She'd learned that the hard way after asking Arnold to test a weapon on her, only to quickly learn that he apparently had bullets able to shoot straight through her using the powers of void magic. The Sword Saint could also pierce her defenses with several attacks, especially when he worked in the concept of erosion, targeting singular areas repeatedly to weaken them before striking. R

After discussing the fight, the two of them talked some more, got updates on the situation in the rest of the Milky Way, ate some food, and waited a bit before the cooldown was up, and they could dive into the simulated Colosseum of Mortals again to have another duel, this one with weapons.

Jake was still a bit surprised at seeing Carmen use a shortsword and a shield for these fights, but she explained it felt oddly similar to how she regularly fought, and it was better than going unarmed against Jake with katars. That didn't mean she didn't lose, with Jake not really ever having a hard time, but she insisted it was good practice, especially the last parts of the battle where she'd fought unarmed until blood loss made her fall over and end the simulation.

This was how they ended up spending the next day or so. Every hour, they would have a fight while filling the time in between just doing whatever they felt would be entertaining – after getting done analyzing the fight they just had, of course.

Their longest time spent in the simulation ended up being nearly two hours. Not because they were fighting all that time, but because they were experimenting with what was possible in there, and yes, a different kind of sparring was possible in the Colosseum, but that particular kind was definitely better in the real world, but that was neither here nor there.

In the end, they ended up spending a bit over a day staying at the lodge, as honestly, leaving at nearly exactly the twenty-four-hour mark would definitely have just been weird

and looked pre-planned. Carmen and Jake went straight to fetch Sylphie, who had been chilling with Vesperia in a small home the True Royal had made for herself deeper inside the forest.

Throughout everything, they were being tracked. Jake considered for a while how to handle this, but on their way back to Haven proper, Sylphie now in tow, one of their stalkers honestly got too close, and Jake couldn't hold himself back anymore.

While looking as if he casually took a step forward, Jake instead used One Step and disappeared, appearing in the sky above. A second step brought him down to appear in front of a thin human male wearing a casual outfit while standing behind a tree. The man's eyes opened wide when he saw Jake, and he was about to speak when Jake made him freeze up with a quick Gaze.

"You should really get better at stealth or consider if this is really the career for you," Jake said in a dry tone as he glanced about, purposefully looking directly in the direction of a few more observers as he spoke up loudly. "Not like the four others are any better."

For the records, there were five others, but the last guy was pretty far away, and Jake only knew he was there due to his Bloodline, so he saw no reason to advertise how good he truly was at detecting unwanted observers.

"Now, I would normally just kill you or have you imprisoned, but I happen to be in a rush today, so I'll let you off with a warning to not be so damn obvious it gets annoying," Jake smiled as he turned to walk away before stopping after a few steps and speaking loudly again. "Oh, and do pass this on when you make your report to at least make yourselves useful: I will soon reach out, so be ready."

With those words, Jake took another two steps, teleporting with both as he went back to Carmen, who was walking with Sylphie on her shoulder.

"Got rid of the stalkers?" she asked him nonchalantly.

"Yeah, that should be all of them... now let's go," Jake answered, the two of them picking up speed as Sylphie gladly was just along for the ride.

The spies keeping an eye on them definitely backed off, with all the people Jake let know he'd seen backing off entirely, likely doing exactly what he'd told them to. He was certain their bosses would be very interested in what Jake had just said. Now, he didn't actually know which factions these people were from, but he assumed at least the majority were related to Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church, which he would soon make contact with, so he'd kept his words purposefully ambiguous.

Also, while this hadn't been part of the plan, Jake had been told to act like himself, and he sure as fuck wouldn't usually allow a bunch of horrible stalkers to follow him unnoticed without at least giving them a good scolding for their offensive lack of skills.

With them handled and having picked up speed, Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie quickly arrived at the teleporter hub in Haven. From there, they went to the outpost close to the Prima Vessel, where more spies – who at least were a lot more subtle – waited and observed what Jake and Carmen would do.

No one really followed them as they went to the now nearly empty Prima Vessel. Only Arnold was inside with that assistant of his, seemingly analyzing the thing while trying to take samples of the metal the Vessel was made of. Arnold also tested some odd magic while scribbling down notes, making Jake and Carmen decide to not bother him.

The guards Miranda had posted at the Vessel naturally let Jake and Carmen through, and they went straight for the teleporter. Carmen already knew what planet they would be going to, and people from Valhal would be waiting on the other side. Once there, the true trickery would begin, and everything would go according to plan...

... alright, maybe that was a bit too much to ask for, but hopefully, everything would at least go acceptably according to plan. Had to be a little realistic sometimes...

--

Kindroth sat in a chamber, a vast ritual circle in front of him, as his surroundings were filled with the radiance of the Great Bright One. He bathed in this light as he felt the presence of his Patron channel into him as they communed with one another.

They spoke for a long time, Kindroth feeling the burden on his body, but this was far from the first time he'd done this. In fact, this was the third time in only a few days he'd made contact with his god, with this time concerning the latest news surrounding the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his actions. More accurately, the actions of him and the Runemaiden of Valdemar. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT *novel•fire•net*

Some of the spies who kept an eye on Jake weren't deployed by enemies but by people who were considered allies of Earth. Trust was still weak, resulting in several world leaders taking the approach of "trust but verify" when it came to the claims coming out of Earth.

During the last day, the top leadership of Earth had been hinting at something. Some big reveal or plan that many believed would fix the current challenges faced by the alliance Earth had established. Many were calling for a military response, but Kindroth had been one of the people firmly opposed to such an approach due to the fear of escalation. It did help that his own world was untouched, though that naturally didn't come as a surprise.

Kindroth and his god discussed recent happenings, the decisions the elf had made during this time, and the plan going forward. They both reached the same conclusion from the newest updates and as the ritual circle faded away, Kindroth couldn't help but let out a sigh.

“So that’s the kind of approach they’ve decided on... such level of foresight to have seen this coming is truly frightening...” he muttered before suddenly smiling. “Well then, better help make it happen as smoothly as possible while we sit back and wait for the grand confrontations between gods and their Chosen...”

As we reap the profits and claim our spoils of war, he thought, not saying that final part out loud, as he truly couldn’t suppress his smile.

One just has to love it when a plan comes together.

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Chapter 1000: Celebration

Jake was fully on board with the Malefic Viper’s plan to trick Yip of Yore by using Valhal and the fact they wanted him to join their faction. He had proceeded with the intention of exploiting Valhal without forming any genuine relations with the people from the Milky Way. However... it turns out they made that really fucking hard.

The moment Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie arrived at Valhal’s planet, Jake had expected a huge welcome party as they knew he and Carmen were coming. Instead, he was met with only three people, one of them being Sven, the former leader besides Carmen of Valhal on Earth. The two others were a woman who was effectively the foreign minister or something like that, with the final man the World Leader of the planet.

“Welcome to you all, Runemaiden, Lord Thayne, and Lady of the Winds,” the World Leader greeted them, speaking far more eloquently than his muscular form and large tower shield he wore on his back would indicate. This was also Jake’s first time hearing the term Lady of the Winds, but it was apparently some name a few people had started calling Sylphie after Nevermore.

“Good to see you again, Bobby,” Carmen greeted him with a smile, and Jake distinctly saw the man’s eye twitch as he turned to Jake.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Boolbaraspmysen Yalajunkarious, World Leader of this quaint little planet and servant of Valhal, and it’s a pleasure to welcome you here despite the strenuous circumstances of your visit,” he said with a smile.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Jake nodded, trying to hold back commenting on the overly long name as he saw Carmen snicker beside him.

The World Leader just kept smiling as he introduced the woman with him, who looked like the only non-warrior of the group. "This here is Elliandrailsapro-"

"-pretty sure it was meant to be sopro," the woman commented with a raised eyebrow as she interrupted the guy.

"Hey, don't blame me! How the hell can you expect me to remember something so stupidly long?" the man shot back as he grinned, shaking his head before looking at Jake. "I'm surprised; you're a lot more polite than I thought you would be."

At this point, Jake realized they were just fucking with him, and based on Carmen's reaction, she had clearly been part of setting this up dumb joke. Sven also cracked a smile, unable to hold himself back, as Jake also smiled and shook his head.

"Believe it or not, I've heard worse," Jake said jokingly.

"Oh yeah, wasn't there such a character in the Colosseum of Mortals?" Carmen commented. "Pol-something. A really long name."

"Pollaystrasirial," Jake corrected her, naturally remembering the mage he'd hung out with alongside Owen while in the Challenge Dungeon.

"You remember that, huh?" Carmen asked with genuine surprise.

"Why wouldn't I?" Jake shrugged. "Pretty sure the system makes remembering stuff like that easy when prompted."

"Unless you didn't really try or want to remember something in the first place," the World Leader added. "Anyway, let me introduce myself again. I'm Bob Bobbyson, but most people just call me Bobby, probably as a way to purposefully annoy me, as Bob is both shorter and easier to say and remember. Hm, maybe also because my old man was called Bobby, and they just like to make things needlessly confusing..."

"Well, I guess it's still nice to meet you, Bobby," Jake smiled, more than happy to continue the tradition of not calling the guy by his actual name.

"Likewise, likewise," the man said, waving him off. "Carmen here did tell us you were, in her words, 'pretty chill,' but I will admit I had my doubts, but I'm definitely not complaining." RĀNQBĚ\$

"No reason to be uptight for no reason," Jake agreed.

"True that. Now, let's not hold you up at the teleporter and get on with it," the World Leader said as he motioned for them to follow. "Would be impolite to not show you the place a little."

“We need to remember the reason why I’m here,” Jake said, turning a bit serious.

“Why the rush getting to the important stuff? I’ve gotten the general gist of things, and don’t worry, the Malefic One’s touch cannot reach this planet,” he said with a high level of confidence. “This world is hallowed ground. The presence of no other gods is allowed, and if they try to forcibly enter, we and the rest of Valhal’s Pantheon will know.”

Jake raised an eyebrow and subtly reached out to the Viper... only to feel as if the connection had been severely weakened. It was still there, but it was akin to going from a gigabit internet connection to a dial-up, and it would take some effort to even make initial contact. Plus, whoever was behind the formation would definitely know.

As for who was behind it? Well, it reminded him of Gudrun’s work, which made sense considering the Blessing of the World Leader in front of him.

[Human – lvl 282 – Greater Blessing of Gudrun]

“I guess rushing isn’t *that* necessary,” Jake agreed, making it obvious he had confirmed what the man had said.

“Great, because I have an awesome bar to show you. They make some really original stuff, and I’m sure the visit will be a memorable experience,” Bobby smiled as they all followed him.

Sylphie had remained quiet throughout it all, just chilling with Carmen, who happily carried her around. The hawk was just there because it had seemed fun to come along, and it also communicated trust Jake was fine with bringing her in the first place. It was no secret Jake valued her highly, as they had plenty of public displays of affection, proving they were essentially family.

Their little group quickly went out of the teleportation hub placed in the middle of what Jake soon learned was the capital city of the planet. Before the system, this had been a planet inhabited by humans in the later stages of the Middle Ages by Earth standards, though they had some areas where they had been oddly modern technology-wise and with how progressive they were.

The capital city was pretty big and housed around twenty million people, with around half a billion living on the planet before the system, with that number now up to over a billion, fueled by the many humans who had traveled there from elsewhere in the Milky Way.

Looking around the city with his Sphere, Jake noted the relatively spartan design of most buildings, as there definitely was a focus on efficiency over aesthetics when it came to architecture. History-wise, Jake also learned that this planet had been one with two major factions for most of their recorded history, both constantly at war with one another until around fifty years ago where – in a real Romeo and Juliet story – the

prince and princess of the two kingdoms fell in love and got married, uniting the two kingdoms and creating the empire.

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What followed was the establishment of a new leadership structure, which ended up focusing on placating the many nobles from both kingdoms, who were all still pissed at each other and fought over all the land that had changed hands dozens of times throughout the centuries, resulting in them gaining a whole lot of power. The citizens suffered with the nobles just raking it in, as the new emperor and empress just sat back, happy that the nobles were happy...

Anyway, a big revolution, lots of rolling heads, and a very messy reform primarily led by military leaders later, they ended up with an odd leadership structure that was pretty much just a military dictatorship but with actual upwards mobility. They had odd laws like settling disputes with combat and whatnot, and Jake did think it sounded pretty damn dysfunctional, but they, it had made them into a society that happily embraced the doctrines of Valhal, so it had kind of worked out, right?

Reaching the bar, Jake would also soon learn this odd culture meant something else. The source of this content is **novel★fire★net**

Speaking of the bar... Jake didn't know if it should be considered normal, but the biggest building in that entire part of the city was the massive bar that reminded Jake more of a warehouse than any kind of bar he'd ever seen. The place was also absolutely packed from top to bottom, with people running about and yelling loudly.

A few people threw glances at Jake and the others, but no one really seemed to care outside of those doing a second take at Sylphie, probably wondering why the hell someone had brought a hawk to the bar. Not that it stood out too much, considering there were several beasts already present, including a large bear that currently seemed to have their head stuck in a barrel.

Bobby saw Jake glance about and began to explain: "It may sound odd, but many view a bar like this as our place of worship. Valhal does not do churches or really any kind of religious buildings, but places like this one do come close. It's somewhere you go before and after a battle, a place to celebrate a victory and raise a final glass to those who have fallen. It may not be official doctrine, but it's pretty normal across the multiverse for members of Valhal to use places such as this for important events and everyday worship."

"Also helps that Valdemar is a brewer himself," Carmen pointed out with a smile as she took in the atmosphere in strides.

“Definitely doesn’t hurt,” Bobby nodded as he led them inside. A lot of the patrons greeted Bobby, and a few also said hi to Carmen, who had visited the planet before during this entire system event.

Jake admittedly wasn’t a big fan of bars like these but still chose to come along and experience a bit of Valhal’s culture. It did certainly have its charms, and when they found a table near the bar itself and got some drinks, Jake also had to admit they had some good stuff there.

Bobby told Jake more stories about their planet and just discussed Valhal in general. It was self-evident he was trying to make Jake’s view of Valhal even better than before and show that he truly did belong with them and not the Order of the Malefic Viper. Or, considering he seemed to have some gist of why Jake was there on the planet in the first place, he wanted to assure Jake he was more than welcome to become one of them.

Jake genuinely appreciated it, even if it did make things harder, considering he felt like he was lying and screwing them over by acting as if he would join when he never planned to. Still, he chose to enjoy his time, as even if he didn’t join, that didn’t mean he wasn’t their ally and could share a beer, right?

About an hour passed, and after Jake was introduced to a few brands of beer that were a bit too experimental for his taste, something he probably should have expected to happen happened. A particularly brawny guy who definitely had a drink too many walked up to Jake and rudely poked him in the back.

“Hey... hey, you’re that Chosen fella, right? I heard you’re-“

Before he could finish, a fist collided with his face as the otherwise polite and well-spoken World Leader threw a haymaker, putting the guy on the floor. Instantly, the mood of the entire bar changed as a lot of people sobered up quickly and turned their way.

Jake was confused, thinking Bobby’s reaction was a bit over the top, but Carmen just grinned. “Now comes the best part of a bar visit and my favorite memory from my first visit.”

Quickly leaning back, Jake dodged a glass thrown at him as another patron had gotten themselves involved. The guy who threw it had an almost bestial look of excitement as he stared at Jake, many of the others doing the same. Jake was confused for a moment... until he understood.

Valhal. Fighting fanatics. A bar full of warriors... and a newcomer hotshot who everyone praised as powerful. Could they really call themselves warriors of Valhal if they didn’t at least test his claim?

Another glass was thrown Jake's way, but he quickly caught it and sent it back where it came from before motioning to the guy, now covered in beer, to throw another. Others took the invitation, and Carmen put a hand on Bobby's shoulder and dragged him back and down into his chair.

"Enjoy the show, Bobby. Oh, and try not to kill anyone, Jake," Carmen said, leaning back, Bobby doing the same, so easily convinced Jake was certain this entire thing wasn't actually a surprise to him.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked if he wanted her to make a big tornado.

"Nah, I'm good," Jake said, enjoying the welcome prepared for him by Valhal as three people charged him at once.

Jake emptied the wooden mug before tossing it on the ground. His chair moaned from the movements, but Jake didn't particularly notice as it was drowned out by all the other pained voices.

The bar was an utter mess, with chairs and tables broken and thrown everywhere, one of the walls was halfway missing, and the floor was covered in blood in most places. In the center of everything was what could only be described as a small mound of people who were beaten up pretty damn badly to the level they could barely move.

On top of this mound sat a shirtless and unharmed Jake, having taken off his cloak and armor as he felt it unfair that so many of his attackers weren't wearing anything either. Plus, people kept grasping onto his clothes, and they had turned all wet and red from the fighting that it was honestly easier to go without.

Only a single table in the entire bar was untouched as Carmen still sat there with Sylphie, enjoying themselves with the foreign minister lady who hadn't joined the fight. Sven was now somewhere beneath Jake in the mound of people, with Bobby embedded in the wall not too far away.

"I told you it would be fun," Carmen spoke loudly as she looked up at Jake with an almost envious look. "I would have joined too, but I get the feeling there wouldn't have been a building left if I had."

"Hey, if nothing else, I now understand why they go with simple building designs," Jake answered with a grin.

Why would one bother making pretty decorations and intricate designs when chances were the building would get broken from a fight within a week or two? Better to make things practical and easier to quickly reconstruct while aiming to make everything as durable as possible. The fact one of the walls had survived Jake throwing Bobby into it with enough force to kill a weaker C-grade was proof of quality construction for sure.

Speaking of Bobby, the guy soon enough got himself off the wall as he fell on the floor. He quickly stood up, one of his legs not able to carry his weight, but he still walked forward as he raised his head and looked at Jake. "How did ya like your welcome party? Quite the celebration, eh?"

As Bobby said, this was Valhal's way of welcoming him as a warrior. Jake had been impressed by the average quality of fighters in the bar but now knew they had been the cream of the crop Valhal in the Milky Way Galaxy had to offer. They were pretty strong, stronger than most of the elite teams of Earth. It was respectable, but when held up against Jake, there naturally was no comparison, and they all knew it. Yet they allowed him to display his power and feel it on their bodies directly. They allowed him to prove himself a warrior and one of them.

It was all truly a celebration of power and comradeship, and Jake felt no animosity from any of the people he'd just beaten to a pulp. Instead, some even seemed as if it was an honor to have been punched in the face by who they believed would soon be a fellow comrade of theirs. Jake felt welcomed for sure... which only made the real reason he was there harder to swallow.

"A celebration indeed," Jake smiled as he leaped off the mound of warriors and landed in front of Bobby. "I would love to keep enjoying myself... but things can only be delayed for so long."

Bobby nodded in response as he pulled out a healing potion to quickly get himself back in better shape.

"You're right," Bobby said, cracking his neck after the healing energies of the potion allowed him to recover somewhat. "It's not like we won't have plenty of time to celebrate victories in the future."

"Let's hope we will," Jake just smiled as the celebration was over, and it was time to get back to work.

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