

Hunter 911

Chapter 911: Ghostvine

For a moment, Jake and the Lunewood Hunter made eye contact. Jake knew it could see him through his stealth immediately as he prepared himself mentally for what was to come. However, even after a solid second, the Hunter just kept observing him without making any aggressive moves.

Frowning, Jake tried to step to the side as its gaze followed him. Was it looking for an opening or something? Its actions didn't make any sense at all. Even when Jake began walking, it just kept looking at him.

When he tried to pick up speed, the Hunter finally moved but still did not attack him. It just followed Jake as he made his way further into the forest, confused as hell. The Hunter even kept the same distance from Jake, its eye never leaving his body for a split second as it ran after him. He had already cut off his conversation with Villy, but now he seriously considered asking if this Hunter was broken.

Something definitely felt off, and Jake released a Pulse of Perception to scan his immediate area and instantly saw that three more Hunters were making their way toward him, all coming from the direction of the Wood Meteorite.

Is it not attacking because it judged it can't beat me alone and is waiting for backup? Jake questioned as he once again prepared himself for a fight.

Yet when the three Hunters arrived, they proceeded to just join the first one in looking at him. It was honestly eerie as fuck, having four large creatures made of vines and stone constantly just stare at you without doing anything. They even stood entirely still when Jake didn't move, only adding to the creepiness.

Deciding to just say fuck it, Jake proceeded toward his target. The four Hunters followed along as Jake got closer and closer to the Wood Meteorite and the army that surrounded it. While he wasn't confident in beating them, he was confident in escaping should things go south, as while the Hunters were the strongest Lunewood creatures he had seen, they were still low-tier.

Soon enough, he reached the Wood Meteorite. Jake entered a large clearing created from the impact crater of the Wood Meteorite, finally laying eyes on the thing. It honestly looked a bit like a spherical

spiky pinecone, except it was utterly massive and pulsating with power, as blueish veins covered the entire meteorite.

Through his sphere and with another Pulse, he also saw how extremely long vines extended down from the Wood Meteorite, piercing many kilometers into the moon. These vines spread like the roots of a tree in the immediate area, but they primarily reached downward in a pretty straight line, going directly for the core as far as Jake could see.

Yet he didn't feel as if the Wood Meteorite was actually siphoning any energy out of the core, making him guess it hadn't reached it yet. Even if it did, Jake wasn't sure it would be capable of absorbing anything, as the moon's core remained a lot more powerful than this meteorite.

Checking with the four Hunters, who had now been joined by five more who had been chilling around the Wood Meteorite, Jake saw the nine of them still didn't seem interested in attacking. To check further, Jake floated into the air as he made his way toward the meteorite, but even as he approached, they didn't make any moves.

They clearly knew he didn't fit there, and yet they didn't see him as an enemy for some reason. It didn't make any sense at all. Was it that they didn't judge him a threat? Or because he hadn't attacked them or destroyed anything yet? Or were they broken somehow? They hadn't even alerted all the other Lunewood creatures to his presence, and Jake felt that it was only the Hunters who even knew he was there due to the peculiar nature of Unseen Hunter.

Once more, trying to ignore them, Jake studied the Wood Meteorite more closely as he flew right up to it. He felt it pulsating with energy, sending waves of its corrupted life energy into the world. This energy also tried to affect him, but he had made sure to cover his body in a few layers of stable arcane mana to ensure his own safety.

Reaching out, Jake touched one of the spikes of the meteorite. The moment he did, he felt a pulse of energy enter his body, but more than just energy; it carried some kind of... desire. Jake felt something go for his soul, as he allowed just a little bit in to understand what was going on. He felt as if he heard a faint whisper telling him to accept it.

The spike Jake was touching then broke off, and he knew what it wanted him to do. It wanted him to take it and absorb it into his body, allowing the Lunewood energy to take over his body and become one with the forest like all the other creatures there.

No... more than that.

It wanted him to become the Lunewood Forest. To merge with the meteorite and be its host. Perhaps it instinctively understood its own shortcomings, and it wanted something to help control it and grow. Jake wasn't sure why, but it seemed to believe he was a good option to make that happen.

Jake was confused, though. Why did it need him? Sandy hadn't mentioned anything like this. According to the worm, these Moon Meteorites didn't have any ego or control at all but were more like a natural force only seeking to expand, and-

It was wilting.

He finally remembered. At the edges of the Lunewood Forest, it wasn't expanding, but the grass was wilting. That's also when Jake understood why it wanted him. A Wood Meteorite only sought to spread its affinity and grow, but this one was broken, and it needed something. That something being Jake.

Needlessly to say, that wasn't anything it could have.

Jake let go of the meteorite that had broken off and let it rest on top of another part of the meteorite. Once more, a pulse of energy was released, and Jake felt a rudimentary soul attack that once more tried to compel him.

Shaking his head, Jake turned as he looked at the nine Lunewood Hunters who still stared at him. He still didn't feel any traces of hostility, even as he walked away from the meteorite. They just kept staring creepily, even as Jake began to explore the rest of the crater, finding many smaller Meteorite Fragments he assumed were from slain Lunewood creatures.

There were a lot of them. Thousands, at least, meaning something had killed them, right? Or was this the fragments it made new creatures from? As Jake was thinking this, he saw something in his sphere. A Stalker was approaching him, walking with steady steps.

Turning, Jake was prepared for it to do something, but all it did was jump on top of the pile of Meteorite Fragments. The second it did, its entire body wilted away in seconds, making another fragment fall atop the pile.

"It's losing energy," Jake spoke out loud with a serious look on his face. The forest was already dying by itself for some reason.

One thing was for certain, something very weird was happening on the moon.

Something that was further confirmed after Jake had spent an hour or so inspecting the crater while considering how he would put down a ritual when he received a message from Sandy, passed along by the Viper, saying just one word:

Stolen story; please report.

"Run."

Sandy wiggled their way through the many tunnels leading deep into the moon. Using the awesome spatial senses that only a worm as awesome as Sandy could have, they quickly realized the quickest way toward the center of the celestial object. It wasn't even that complicated, as there was what looked like a deep shaft that led most of the way there, just large enough to fit a growing worm.

Getting further and further down, Sandy made a few stops to gobble up something tasty. There were only a few weak elementals here and there, all way too slow for Sandy. Many of the snacks weren't even that tasty, but they were different and worth a try. Variety is the spice of life, after all.

Days passed, with Sandy getting closer to the core. It was a bit odd, but in the cases of most planets or even larger celestial objects like the moon, the core wasn't some large super-dense area of pure molten lava and metal. Instead, it was a vast open space with a relatively small spherical metal ball floating in the middle.

True, sometimes the temperature was really high in the core room or chamber, or whatever one called it, making the room far from a healthy environment. Not that it bothered Sandy much the times the worm had seen other Planetary Cores. None of the weird phenomena that could happen close to a planet's core ever really bothered Sandy before. However, as Sandy got closer to this core, there was something really annoying.

Because, while Sandy wasn't an alchemist like Jake, the worm was pretty sure large vines weren't supposed to grow this deep underground. What's more, all the vines felt really weird. Like, they had the same aura, but one that felt a bit different than the Lunewood stuff above. It was clearly still related to the Wood Meteor, as they looked the same, but something was definitely different.

It didn't take Sandy long to get close to the center of the moon, where the worm quickly went straight for the core. It was super easy to feel where it was, as it gave off a powerful response from Sandy's treasure-sensing skills.

The odd vines also only multiplied in number and looked even weirder the more Sandy saw. Some of them went through solid rock but didn't penetrate it. No, it was more like they phased through the rock as if they were ethereal.

These vines didn't move around or do anything, though Sandy was on watch, being careful. There was no doubt in Sandy's mind that these vines were related to the B-grade, so caution was key. Even if the B-grade hadn't shown any aggressiveness yet.

Passing through a few more tunnels, Sandy finally entered the large open space that also contained the core. However, rather than see a core, Sandy saw a giant mass of vines where the core was supposed to be, with the actual core likely within.

The space containing the core was many kilometers in diameter, yet Sandy felt that the environment was oppressive. The cause of this wasn't hard either, and a moment later, the being revealed itself.

Energies gathered to form a ghostly shade of sorts that regarded Sandy as it sent a powerful telepathic message filled with... a lot of things. It wasn't really words but more a collection of images, emotions, and what Sandy could vaguely interpret as words, with the shade asking just one question:

"Why are you here?"

One Sandy could naturally easily answer.

"I'm here to explore," the worm responded in a neutral tone, as Sandy tried to be as non-threatening as possible. "Not going to bother you at all."

There was no response for several moments. This gave the worm some time to take in the entire core room and detect everything there. It didn't take long to figure things out.

Sandy was a smart worm. So Sandy quickly realized, as they expanded their senses and felt the traces of what had once been a great natural treasure inside the core room. One provided directly by the system, not unlike the ones Sandy had consumed during their younger days, albeit far, far more potent. With this and everything else, Sandy put together what had happened.

The Lunewood Meteorite had begun to spread all over the planet, and its vine-like roots had drilled into the ground, seeking out the greatest energy source available: the core. It had succeeded most of the way, as it had likely sent some of its creatures down to clear out elementals and stuff in the way.

Then, one day, a Lunewood creature reached the core room and absorbed that special system-provided item, for it to then evolve into what Sandy was currently seeing. Sandy also vaguely felt the concept of death in the air, so it was even likely the creature had died and been brought back to life. Maybe it had been cut off by the Wood Meteorite once it began to change, thus dying? There were many potential explanations, but Sandy was pretty certain they had reached the right one for the most part.

As Sandy had just brilliantly deduced what was going on, the creature spoke again, the message far more coherent and simple this time around:

"Leave."

"Alright, alright," Sandy said, remaining calm. "I didn't mean to intrude, I was just curious, and I'll be on my way,"

Yep, definitely no reason to annoy the B-grade creature that Sandy didn't at all understand. It was some weird undead creature that somehow still gave off eerie life energy. What's more, Sandy hadn't even found anything they could identify yet. It didn't work on the core or the weird ghostly thing that honestly looked a bit like a large floating carpet.

"Leave," the message echoed again.

"Going!" Sandy responded as they turned around and began flying toward the exit of the core room.

"Leave... now."

Sandy got a bad feeling and picked up more speed as-

"LEAVE NOW!"

The telepathic message itself carried so much malice that Sandy temporarily froze up as vines flew out of all the walls, seemingly summoned out of nowhere. Reacting quickly, the worm teleported forward to avoid them as more vines moved to block the worm off, making Sandy curse.

"Did you want me to leave or not!"

There was no answer, as a massive vine was summoned out of a wall, slamming into Sandy's side, sending the giant worm reeling as they were blasted away. While flying, Sandy did two things... finally managed to land an Identify and sent a message to their Patron to be passed along to Jake.

[Ghostvine Sovereign – lvl ???]

He had to get away... because there was no way they could fight this thing. Sandy felt the blood run down their side as the worm's thick skin had been sliced open, and powerful energies of death were seeping in.

This isn't good.

Jake reacted instantly, despite not having any sense of danger yet, as he flew into the air. This proved to be a good decision, as only a moment later, he felt it. An aura washed over him as if something had spread out its presence to where he was.

He saw the Wood Meteorite practically shiver as all the Lunewood Hunters, for the first time, diverted their gazes from him as they instead stared at the ground. Jake released a Pulse of Perception, trying to

feel for what was coming, but there was nothing but an odd energy permeating this area of the moon, and nothing that should-

Suddenly, a vine shot out of the ground below, aimed straight at Jake. His eyes opened wide, as he barely managed to dodge due to the forewarning from his danger sense. The vine extended many kilometers out from the moon and swung as it tried to whip Jake again.

That's when the Lunewood creatures made their move. All of them moved at once, attacking the vine with all they had, the hunters throwing stones infused with energy, with the thousands of Stalkers, Keepers, and Vipers also attacking.

The response from whatever the fuck attacked Jake was to release another dozen vines, all seemingly summoned out of nowhere. They just sprung up from the moon despite seemingly not coming from anywhere. It was like they had just been stuck onto the moon's surface, only attached with a bit of energy.

These new vines didn't attack Jake, but instead, they attacked some of the Lunewood creatures. Jake saw how the vines whipped a Stalker, leaving a deep gash... that then began to rot, as Jake felt the unquestionable concept of death within the attack.

With a single whip, the stalker wilted away, dying. Jake was alarmed as he'd stopped mid-air. Something that proved to be a bit decision, as that had only led to the continued ire of what he was now certain was the B-grade.

The presence all around him intensified as Jake felt a shiver run down his spine. Below, the Lunewood creatures were getting slaughtered, but they did manage to tear apart many of the vines. But as the atmosphere intensified, they all froze up, and Jake's eyes opened wide.

A wave of energy washed over him as the moon's surface erupted with vines, as far as he could see. Thousands... no, tens of thousands of vines shot up from the moon, seemingly not targeting anything or anyone in particular.

Then, right below Jake, floating just above the treetops of the Lunewood Forest, mana gathered as a giant eye dozens of kilometers in diameter formed, staring straight at Jake as it sent a powerful telepathic message slamming into Jake's head and making him reel backward.

"Begone!"

Jake didn't hesitate as he used One Step to repeatedly teleport upwards as vines chased after him. Once he got far enough up, they stopped chasing, but Jake still kept going as he wanted as much distance as possible. Many thoughts ran through his mind, but one more than any other:

What was happening with Sandy? He still had a Mark on the worm, and he felt that they were still deep down inside the moon and-

It disappeared... and he instantly knew:

Sandy had died.

Chapter 912: Not An Egg

Jake's mind went blank for a moment as the realization sunk in. Yet what he had expected to follow next never came. There was no anger or desire for revenge... just a belief that he had to get the fuck away from the moon as fast as humanly possible.

Anything capable of killing Sandy wasn't something Jake was confident in facing, and just feeling the aura from the thousands of vines extended up from the surface of the moon, Jake knew that this wasn't just some weak low-tier B-grade. It was already quite a few levels into B-grade and a powerful variant on top of that. The mere fact it had a range extending all the way from the center of the moon to the surface was proof enough of that.

Luckily, it didn't seem to attack him as he flew away. The eye had also faded away, and all the vines began to retract back into the ground, leaving a battered Lunewood Forest behind. Many rotting spots were left where the vines had shot up from, and hundreds of Lunewood creatures had died. For some reason, the B-grade didn't seem to care about the forest at all, and it had more or less just been collateral damage while trying to get Jake to leave.

Speeding up his flight, Jake just went further and further into empty space. He didn't have any particular direction he was flying in, he just wanted to make sure he was out of range from any potential attacks that could reach beyond the moon. Only when he was many thousand kilometers away from the exit of

the moon's exosphere did Jake slow down before he stopped and had a while to think. And the first thought he had was to reach out to someone who had to know what had happened.

"Villy, what the fuck happened to Sandy? I felt the Mark disappear, and I think they died, but-"

"Sandy did die," the Viper just answered in a casual tone.

Jake's mind went blank a bit again before he quickly gathered his thoughts. "Then why am I not-"

Suddenly, Jake stopped as he felt his spatial necklace act odd, as if something wanted to break out.

"I think you'll find the answer is quite obvious," Villy commented, still clearly unbothered.

Things within the moon had not gone as planned for everyone's favorite Cosmic Genesis Worm.

Sandy had met their fair share of powerful beings while traveling around the multiverse and eating stuff, and sometimes, one naturally gets into trouble when eating the tasty snacks of others. Yet, this was definitely in the top two for most dangerous situations Sandy had ever gotten themselves into.

The wound on the worm's side was already rotting, and more vines were closing in as the Ghostvine kept sending those nonsensical telepathic packages, yelling at Sandy to leave while not giving the poor worm any chance to actually do so. Sometimes, a worm had to be decisive, so Sandy steeled themselves and didn't think twice before doing what had to be done:

"Begin operation clean up and consolidate! Go, go, go!" Sandy yelled to all the people and creatures in their internal worlds – also known as all the different stomachs - as Sandy opened gateways between all of them. They also quickly tried to spit out the Lunewood Meteorite Fragments hoping they were the cause of the aggression, but it didn't make the attack stop.

A dozen vines closed in as Sandy shifted in space, teleporting out of the way. Entering Sandy's Sand World wasn't possible with space this unstable – the place not really made for fleeing either. It was made for traveling, first and foremost.

Sandy did have other defensive means, though.

Hardening the cosmic dust, Sandy slowed down all the vines, going for the worm. At the same time, the wound was rapidly healing as space shifted, launching Sandy toward the tunnel the worm had entered the core chamber from. Vines moved to block the worm, but with Sandy's intense momentum, they managed to slip through, entering the tunnel.

Yet it wasn't enough, as more vines just appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. They just popped into existence without any rhyme, reason, or warning. It was as if the entire moon was part of the Ghostvine's body, which probably wasn't that far off.

The Ghostvine had integrated itself with the moon's core, after all.

Sandy kept going through the tunnels, teleporting, dodging, and blocking vines, but they just kept coming. A few managed to slip through, leaving nasty wounds all over the worm's body and eating away at Sandy's vital energies.

It definitely didn't help that Sandy had practically trapped themselves within the belly of the beast. To escape and do long-range teleports, Sandy needed to get out of the vast tunnel network of the moon and into open space, but there was just so far.

Too far.

So, rather than escape, the name of the game was dragging things out as long as possible to give Tom and the others enough time to get everything prepared. Thus, Sandy did their best, as the wounds got worse and worse, and Sandy knew that death was inevitable.

Luckily, before death came, Sandy got the confirmation they needed.

"We're done."

Sandy didn't hesitate as they turned around and flew at full speed back toward the core chamber. The Ghostvine wasn't ready for this, allowing Sandy to get pretty damn close before too many vines impeded their path, and a dozen wrapped around the worm's body, crushing it.

"You win this one, stupid vine!" Sandy telepathically yelled as the worm mobilized the rest of the energy in their body. "But I'll be back!"

Sandy's body began to glow in a silvery light until suddenly, the worm was just gone... a faint mark left behind in space-time that even Jake wouldn't be able to detect.

Jake's spatial necklace was giving off an alarming response, and his eyes opened wide as he felt as if it was about to burst. He didn't hesitate as he pulled out the item that was acting up. Jake had already realized by now what it was, as the egg that Sandy kept insisting wasn't an egg appeared. However, rather than just looking like a weird rock, it was now glowing and filled with complicated runes far more complicated than Jake could comprehend.

Soon, the egg cracked as it leaked intense waves of energy that washed over Jake. Space itself shuddered before Jake saw a familiar tail pop out of the bottom of the egg. Then, the entire thing exploded, as a worm only half a meter across appeared before rapidly expanding in size as a full Cosmic Genesis Worm was born... or reborn?

"I LIVE!" Sandy's voice echoed out as the worm wiggled in excitement - a feeling of excitement that quickly died down as the worm turned to look at Jake solemnly. "I think we should postpone moon exploration for a while..."

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

Jake just stared at the worm for a moment as he blurbed out the first thing on his mind:

"Are you okay?"

"Okay is a relative term," Sandy said in a sad tone. "I feel like crap, and just existing hurts right now. I'm also super weak, so please don't make me do anything for a while, okay?"

"Alright," Jake said with some concern as he was silent for a dozen seconds, just allowing the worm to wriggle back and forth a bit, getting used to being alive. "I take it this is the backlash from that second life skill?"

"Yep," Sandy said, rolling over in space to lay with the stomach up. "My poor tummy."

That's when Jake realized... what happened to everything Sandy had eaten? More importantly, what happened to the people?

"What happened to what was in your many stomachs? Such as the dietitian?" Jake asked, now back to being fully concerned.

"They're all fine," Sandy said calmly.

"Oh, good," Jake sighed in relief as he would have felt a lot worse if he had inadvertently got a few random people killed. "So I take it your internal stomachs aren't negatively affected when reborn?"

"They super much are negatively affected. I have to limit everything to two stomachs for the skill, with everything not inside them getting consumed. It was only one stomach a while ago when I was reborn, but I got it up to two now, but it's still far from enough! It's pretty hard to put everything into two stomachs only, especially when each has its own environment that I spent time cultivating. Heck, it's impossible to do. Now all of those fun biomes are gone, and I have to start over," Sandy explained in a sad and annoyed tone. "But, together with the people in there, such as Tom and that dietitian that was forced upon me, I can gather everything and everyone important in the two stomachs I keep to at least make the losses not as worse as they could be. Again, it's not perfect... as an example, that alchemy lab you got? Yeah, that's gone."

"I see," Jake muttered. "That's a big sacrifice but a cheap price to pay for a second life in the grand scheme of things."

"Easy for you to say. Gonna be a pain to get everything back to what it was. Not to mention the literal pain of having the majority of your stomachs implode. Gotta wait for everything before I'll feel whole again," Sandy complained.

"How long do you reckon it will take?" Jake asked with a frown.

"Depends. If I do nothing... a long time. If I eat stuff to help replenish my energy, not as long. I have some stuff already in my emergency rations to speed things up, but even if everything goes well, it will take me a few months at least," Sandy answered.

"Just say if there's anything I can do to help," Jake sighed. He felt pretty damn bad about having dragged Sandy all the way to the moon only for this to happen. From the looks of it, the worm hadn't even gotten anything out of the trip. Meanwhile, Jake had, at the very least, collected a cool-looking rock to bring back to his nephew... yeah, it had been a sucky trip overall.

"It's fine for now, I don't need anything from you," Sandy surprisingly rejected Jake's offer of food. "Because that's the second thing that sucks right now. I can't even eat a lot before I full super stuffed, as, you know, the vast majority of my stomachs just imploded. Who would have thought that had an adverse effect on appetite?"

"Alright, alright," Jake nodded as he tried to lighten the mood. "You know, now I understand why you said you would be fine no matter what. That skill is the one you got from the True Blessing of the Lord Protector, right? I must say, it makes me a bit jealous that you have a skill that makes you impossible to kill. Meanwhile, I just got a skill primarily designed to fuck with people trying to use Identify on me."

"Rude," the Malefic Viper interjected, as Jake entirely ignored him.

"Eh, it's overpowered for sure, but I can't say it's perfect. Big Boss Hydra did warn me of some potential flaws. Some skills will allow whatever killed me to still track me down while I'm weakened, and certain attacks can leave bad lingering effects even a rebirth can't fix. Too bad soul damage and curses are two examples of this that the Big Boss pointed out. Then, there is, of course, karmic magic, which can outright block the rebirth or even tap into the power from the skill to attack me even after the fact. There are other means of blocking off my ability to be reborn, too, but they are super rare, and I am working on counters to all of them," Sandy explained willingly.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to share all the weaknesses of what's arguably your biggest trump card with others? Even if it's me?" Jake asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Oh, no, it's a stupid thing to do, but I reckon if I want you to carry around one of my egg things, it's only polite to tell you... oh yeah, that gets me to one of the other drawbacks. I need the egg things to do my rebirth trick, so if the final one breaks or is lost or something, I'm screwed. Also, I can't control which one I use; it's always the closest," Sandy continued, over-explaining their abilities with a sigh. "So, anyway, I will need to reconstruct the egg, which takes a lot of stuff I could have eaten instead, so that

sucks. And all of that comes after I heal my stomachs. It all just takes so much time and energy to do... dying is a real bummer, you know?"

"From the times I've tried it, death indeed has been wholly unpleasant," Jake answered honestly, remembering the Challenge Dungeons in Nevermore, especially the Colosseum of Mortals and his strategy of just throwing lives at Valdemar.

"Right?"

Sandy agreed. "I think we should both strive to not die as much."

The two of them fell silent for a while as Sandy slowly got back their bearings. It would take a bit for the worm to feel well enough to move, and Jake didn't want to disturb Sandy while that happened.

While Jake had asked some questions about Sandy's skill, he still had no idea how it worked. Not really. Sure, he knew what it did, but the fundamental concepts behind it were a massive mystery to him. He also reckoned there was more to it than Sandy said. Especially seeing as there wasn't just one egg but multiple, giving Sandy more than one extra life.

If there wasn't more to it than met the eye, why wouldn't all gods give their Chosen a skill like this? Having a Chosen was a risk, and a skill like this would heavily alleviate that risk. Jake wanted to ask Villy, but decided to postpone that conversation for later.

After a bit of time had passed, Sandy spoke again:

"The thing inside the moon is something called a Ghostvine Sovereign," the worm said. "Ever heard about one before?"

Jake frowned as he rummaged through his memory before he shook his head. "No, can't say I have, but the name is pretty telling in its own right. Plus, anything with Sovereign in its name makes me assume it can't be weak."

"It definitely isn't. What's more, it has merged with the moon's core entirely," Sandy kept explaining.

"That's... bad," Jake muttered.

"Yep," Sandy readily agreed. "But, there is one kind of good thing. I don't think this Ghostvine has any real intelligence. It looks like it does, but there is no cohesion in its thought pattern or telepathic messages, and I sensed primarily emotion and not anything truly complex from it. Heck, I think it only attacked me because of the Lunewood Meteorite Fragments I had in my stomach, and that was entirely on instinct. Once I was designated as an enemy, the way the attacks worked seemed almost automatic."

Jake could only agree as he also found the way the Ghostvine had acted odd. "Then what do you think it wants? For some reason, it didn't attack the Lunewood Forest at all."

"I'm not sure, and in all honesty, I don't think the Ghostvine is either. It may be because it originated from the Lunewood Forest and thus instinctively views it as a part of it that shouldn't be destroyed, or it may be because it uses the life energy to fuel its own death energy. Or, you know, something entirely illogical since we are talking about a creature that doesn't really operate on logic here."

They were quiet once more for a minute before Sandy spoke again. "Just to be clear, we both agree on what we're gonna do about that stupid Ghostvine and the celestial object it integrated itself with, right?"

"Oh yeah," Jake nodded as he looked at the moon. "We're gonna kill that fucking Ghostvine one way or another... even if the moon has to go along with it."

"Can we call it Operation: Moonfall?"

"Sure?" Jake agreed, confused.

"Thank you. Tom will be very happy to hear that."

"I'm sure he will," Jake said with a smile. "Now let's go home, alright?"

"Alright... but you're in charge of transport this time around, at least for the first part of the trip," Sandy said.

“Sure,” Jake shrugged, wondering how exactly he planned on doing that. Maybe he could have Sandy-

“And no, I’m not shrinking down. Can’t at the moment.”

... or he could figure something else out.

Chapter 913: The Sword Of A Hero

As things in Nevermore were still fully ongoing, even after the initial batch of geniuses were done, the rest of the multiverse had fallen into a bit of a lull. Even if plans were still in motion, many factions focused on the mega-dungeon first and foremost, as there wasn’t much else to deal with. Yet, shortly after having barely gotten over the appearance of an extinct True Royal, the return of the Malefic Viper, and the Chosen of the newly returned Primordial becoming the new top record holder on the Nevermore Leaderboards, another event shook the many intelligence agencies of the multiverse. The culprit, this time around, was another known figure, but what he had done, few had seen coming:

A clash with another Primordial... the Starseizing Titan.

The echoing sounds of the Cosmic Forge, the exclusive forge of the Starseizing Titan, ceaselessly sent waves of energy through the multiverse, yet that day, it had stilled. The many factions housed nearby instantly noticed, as whenever the Titan stopped working, it was due to some disturbance from an outside factor. Yet none dared even suggest who would be brave enough to interrupt the Primordial like this. The level of disrespect was nearly unimaginable unless it was another Primordial or being of equal standing.

Yet, the one who had done it made no attempts to hide as the aura of Yip of Yore spread throughout the cosmos for all of the nearby gods stationed there by their respective factions to feel. The Starseizing Titan was not one for secrecy either, as his voice boomed through space as the two gods had a very public confrontation.

“What have you come here for, young god?” the Titan asked - his question very much an insult by calling Yip nothing more than a young god. What’s more, his aura increased, pushing back Yip of Yore’s, even slightly overpowering it.

"I merely came to see the creator of the relics of old," Yip of Yore answered, amplifying his voice to match that of the Primordial as he strengthened his own aura. "And to see if you could do me a minor favor and take a look at a little weapon of mine. I heard you know your stuff, even if your knowledge may be a bit outdated."

"Impudent," the dismissive voice of the Starseizing Titan said. "Leave me be, young one. You have no quarrel with me and do not wish for me to quarrel with you."

"I just asked for a quick evaluation..." Yip answered, not heeding the words of the Titan at all.

All the gods observing with long-range scouting skills had them fully activated as they watched this scene take place. Yip floated in front of the far more massive Starseizing Titan. He was so small, like a single atom before a massive boulder, yet the aura he gave off made his presence unquestionable.

What was also unquestionable was the weapon he held in his hand. It was a simple-looking steel sword, yet it gave off an odd feeling to all who saw it. As if there was far more to the weapon than met the eye... like it had a long history of accomplishments behind it.

"This sword," Yip spoke loudly as he held it up, "is known as the Hero's Sword. Not because it was crafted by some mythical being or because it's made of the greatest materials in the multiverse... but because of what it has done. What's it's been through. Rather than being forged in fire, it has been forged in the Records of my Path."

He said these words, as if announcing them to the multiverse and not just to say them to the Primordial. No, it was a message to all of them, including the other eleven Primordials.

"I do not find myself impressed that you have a sword with a storied history. All with a long Path has such weapons," the Titan once more dismissed the younger god.

"Yet none has a story greater than mine," Yip smiled. "Now, please. Evaluate my weapon."

"No. Leave my sight."

There was no room for argument. All observed curiously to see Yip's reaction, as he just smiled. Almost as if this was exactly what he had wanted to happen.

"Then allow me to take the initiative... and, in my own impudence, test my little sword on what most call the most durable thing in the multiverse," Yip of Yore said as he lowered the sword and pointed it at the Starseizing Titan.

"You."

Without any further warning, reality shattered as the sword was swung. Space bent as a crescent wave of force powerful enough to tear Godkings and Godqueen apart with ease fell upon the shoulder of the massive body of the Starseizing Titan.

A loud scraping sound was heard as the sword seemingly failed to land a single mark, and the Titan retaliated with a simple punch. Yip of Yore was pushed away as if the universe itself commanded it, sending him flying backward as he quickly stabilized with a smile on his face.

"What a waste of effort," the Titan spoke. "Stop wasting my time with your antics."

"Wasted... antics... I don't think so," Yip of Yore said as he lifted his sword and pointed at the Starseizing Titan again. "The sword of a hero... can cut anything and anyone he is determined to fight."

A crackling sound was heard as everything went silent. On the shoulder of a Starseizing Titan, a long cut had formed, as his almost crystalline body had cracked all along it, and mana poured out of his body like a torrent, shocking everyone who observed.

"YOU!" the Starseizing Titan yelled as he swung his right hand holding the hammer. Space imploded as a shockwave was sent out that washed over the already retreating Yip of Yore. The wound on the Titan had already mended itself by the time the swing was over, but the mere fact his natural defenses had been breached...

Yip grinned as he defended himself as best he could while flying backward, a bit of blood on his lips from the shockwave that he had luckily managed to avoid for the most part. "Not gonna push my luck further than this... and thank you for your high evaluation."

With that, Yip of Yore disappeared, having made history once more.

The word of what had happened spread like wildfire as the legend of the weapon was further empowered. A sword capable of cutting and injuring the Starseizing Titan, the most durable of all Primordials...

Was one capable of killing any of the Primordial.

And whoever was wielding it had the potential to be the very first Primordial Slayer in the multiverse.

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As the multiverse was getting shaken up a bit, Jake was entirely too busy flying through space, pulling a large net of mana strings with quite the catch on the other end.

"Forward, my steed! To Earth!" Sandy yelled as Jake flew as fast as he could while the worm clearly enjoyed himself. Jake, not so much, as dragging along a giant worm that liked to wriggle from time to time wasn't the easiest job in the world.

"You know, I have a great idea. What if I just shoot exploding arrows at you to propel you toward Earth?" Jake offered. "That would be a lot more fun. Probably faster, too."

"... you would really do that to a poor worm that got injured to this extent trying to help you? Well... I guess if that's what you want, I can give up my health and dignity to--"

"Just... fine," Jake sighed as they kept flying.

"Good steed."

"You can't whisper under your breath with telepathic messages," Jake muttered.

“You totally can...”

“No, you can’t.”

“Where there is a will, there is a way.”

The very intelligent conversation between two Chosen of ancient gods continued with Jake having his first real flight through space. While most of his mental energy was spent talking to Sandy, a lot also went into subtly trying to take in the environment and trying to figure out how to fly faster.

Needless to say, One Step was not a possibility, so Jake had to rely solely on his wings for this flight. With constant acceleration space gone, Jake couldn’t just burn energy to attain near-infinite speed, but he could still fly a lot faster in space than on Earth. His top speed was especially outstanding, and he believed he would be able to make it back to Earth in only a bit over two weeks if he kept up his current pace. That was roughly five days to fly approximately ten times the diameter of Earth, which was pretty good in Jake’s book. Compared to Sandy, it was on the slower side, but considering Jake wasn’t a giant cosmic worm and instead had to drag a cosmic worm along with him, he was more than satisfied.

Not that Jake expected to make the full trip. Sandy was recovering quickly, and one of the first things to usually be replenished was the most important powers – such as movement skills. Sandy would be weakened, sure, but even a Sandy at ten percent speed was faster than Jake in space.

“By the way, where do you wanna go when you get back to Earth?” Sandy asked after a bit. “Sorry to say, but I don’t think I’ll be a fun adventuring companion for a while.”

“It’s fine, you just rest... and I’m not sure yet,” Jake answered honestly. “But I do plan on staying on Earth for the most part, only popping back to the Order if I need anything there. Besides doing alchemy, I have no other plans before the Prima Guardian arrives, outside of waiting for Miranda and the others to get back.”

“Yeah... I think I’ll go back to the Order for a while to heal. Big Boss Hydra already told me he got stuff ready to help me,” the worm said. “Tasty stuff too...”

"I see, I see," Jake nodded as he hid his worry while he kept flying. The worrying feeling wasn't just from this one comment but from Jake thinking more about a prior conversation he had with the Malefic Viper. So, he reached out to the god to share his concerns, even if it probably wasn't his place to do so.

"Hey, Villy, you got a second?" Jake asked the snake god.

"I have a lot more than a second. Infinite time, in fact. A perk of being a god, you should try it sometime," the snake god answered cheekily.

"Very funny. My worry is about Sandy and-"

"Don't be," the Viper cut him off. "First of all, very heretical of you to doubt the Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper's abilities to nurture his own Chosen. Secondly, you are correct that the methods Snappy is using with the cosmic worm wouldn't work with you."

"It's just that... won't Sandy's Records be hurt by this? Getting things handed to you like that is generally bad, right? You also say that too much help kills Records, and from the sounds of it, Snappy is helping Sandy a whole lot," Jake voiced his concerns. "Especially with that resurrection skill. Won't it hurt Sandy a whole lot that the worm is very rarely, if ever, in true danger of dying? I know it may affect Sandy less than it would me, but if I had that kind of skill... yeah, I wouldn't want it at all."

"You two are not the same. You are a hunter who needs to find his own prey and needs to do his own thing. Danger is a part of the thrill of the hunt and whatnot. But haven't you considered how much help you've gotten with alchemy? How you've been handed expensive materials, books, teachers, everything you could want is available to you, and you use it freely. Yet it does not hurt your Records... why is that?" the Viper did that annoying teaching thing where he made Jake realize things on his own.

"Because... it doesn't matter as much where I get the materials from, but what I make from them... and with books and all that, I still study it myself and reach my own conclusions. Not that I really learn much outside of doing, so... oh. I really only earn Records by doing, huh?" Jake realized, a bit annoyingly so, as he realized this had been what the Viper was fishing for.

"Bingo. Now consider Sandy. What do you think is core to that worm's Path?"

“Eating?” Jake said, not really that sure.

“Pretty much so. Eating and exploration to get things to eat. However, the most important is to just get whatever food Sandy wants. That’s where the real Records come from. It’s true that self-found objects have a unique flavor of Records that gifted items won’t, but Sandy can eat so much gifted food compared to what the worm needs to find alone that the proportions aren’t even funny. Sandy would, without a doubt, be capable of reaching A-grade without ever leaving the confines of the Order unless exploring with a god as backup and just sleeping and eating in complete safety. Maybe even S-grade. Because the source of food is such a minor factor for Sandy’s Path. Of course, such an S-grade would be pretty weak, even if Sandy is a strong variant. The end result would be a cosmic worm with subpar skills and all that. Sure, it won’t be as bad as the forcibly raised angels of the Holy Church, but it is definitely better for the cosmic worm to also explore by themselves and strive for some level of self-improvement,”

the Viper said, going on a bit of a tangent toward the end.

Jake just nodded telepathically, ignoring the part about angels entirely. “Thanks for putting my mind at ease. Anyway... moon’s haunted, eh?”

“Indeed, it seems so. Not to worry, it happens,” the Viper shrugged on the other end. “Speaking of things that may come to haunt you... kind of a big story in the multiverse these days, and it’s probably best you hear it from me so you don’t get surprised. It’s about how Yip of Yore...”

The Viper proceeded to tell Jake about the god’s recent exploits regarding his “fight” with the Starseizing Titan. This was not something Jake had expected to hear today, and definitely not in the category of good news.

“Does he really call his sword the Hero’s Sword?” Jake questioned after Villy was done.

“Weird thing to focus on, but yes, he does. Because he is the legendary hero of his own story,” the Viper answered.

“Also, isn’t the timing a bit... you know,” Jake continued.

“He is reclaiming some momentum. Showing that even if his Chosen has faltered against you, it’s inconsequential to his goals. It’s to prove he is still more than powerful enough to not only fight but

potentially kill a Primordial. The more people believe he can do that, the more powerful he will become when actually facing a Primordial in a true battle to the death. When he faces me in a battle to the death," Villy explained calmly.

Calmly enough for Jake to not yet feel overly worried, even if the news were worrying.

"I'll trust you got things handled," Jake just said.

"A wise choice."

The connection slowly faded after a bit more small talk as Jake just kept flying, occasionally talking to Sandy on the way. After about a week, Sandy was back in good enough condition to eat Jake and handle the rest of the trip. The worm had even made a new, more private stomach for Jake to be in. No alchemy lab, though.

Jake did say that he could just go where the dietitian and other people were, but Sandy rejected that entirely.

"I don't want Tom to interact with bad influences," Sandy said very firmly.

"Did you just call me a bad influence?" Jake asked in disbelief.

"You drag people into doing dumb things all the time," Sandy argued.

"Are you really going to-"

"Such as convincing them to go to haunted moons."

"I had no idea the moon was haunted," Jake muttered.

"Perhaps it always has been... food for thought."

"I am beginning to believe you are the bad influence on Tom," Jake said sternly.

"It's the other way around. Tom is a good influence on everyone else. That's why he's Tom."

"... and who did you say Tom was again? And don't just say Tom is--"

"Tom. Glad you understand."

Chapter 914: Back In The Laboratory

Flying on the Sandy Express was definitely faster than riding the Jake Carriage, even if Sandy wasn't in top form. After only about a day, they returned to Earth, where Sandy dropped off Jake at Skyggen before heading off to head back to the Order. Jake did end up asking how Sandy even traveled back and forth, as he usually had to use his connection to Villy when teleporting, and the answer was as obvious as it could be. The teleportation circle made by those snakes had just been altered a bit to allow Snappy to do the same thing the Viper did.

With Jake and Sandy split up once more, Jake made a quick visit to his family, who were all surprised to see him back so soon. Luckily, the moon being haunted was a universally good explanation for why he hadn't wanted to stick around there. It did have the slight downside of Adam being very suspicious of the pretty rock Jake had brought back, and it took a lot of effort to convince him that particular rock wasn't haunted.

Jake ended up staying in Skyggen for another day before he decided to head back to Haven. This time around, he didn't have any stops on the way, so he just took the teleportation circle back. Honestly, the best new thing Jake had gained during all his time in Nevermore was definitely the Unseen Hunter skill, as it allowed him to travel around without being bothered by anyone. He could even take public teleporters and stuff without a whole crowd gathering to stare at him.

Plus, he could skip queues. A bit unethical, but a perk of being invisible for sure.

As Jake had already talked to Sandy about, he truly didn't have plans set in stone. Yet it felt like he didn't really need any plans either, as the Prima Guardian stuff was right around the corner. Having spent fifty

years in Nevermore had changed his perspective on time quite a lot, and waiting not even two years was barely worth mentioning. It was a few good alchemy sessions at most.

Once back in Haven, Jake started out by quickly stopping by Arnold's place. The man wasn't surprised when Jake came at all, clearly able to see through his stealth skill. Truly, further proof Perception was the best stat.

"Hey there," Jake said after he was let in as he joined the scientist in his workshop. As always, Arnold was working on stuff Jake didn't at all understand, but a lot of it seemed themed around space exploration stuff. Jake got the feeling this was the topic the guy obsessed the most over these days.

"My satellites spotted you returning from space. Did you arrive on the moon safely?" Arnold asked with a genuinely curious tone.

"Well, we did arrive safely," Jake scratched the back of his head. "Can't say it ended well, though."

Arnold raised an eyebrow, clearly communicating he wanted Jake to elaborate. So Jake did and told Arnold everything that had happened on the moon, including the presence of the Ghostvine and how Sandy believed the B-grade had merged with the core. Likely irreversibly so. He also included his future plans.

"Hm. If this was before the arrival of the system, I would call anyone wanting to destroy the moon someone aiming to doom this planet and humanity. Now, I am not even certain the gravitational forces applied to us by the moon have any tangible effects, nor that there will be any noticeable fallout should the moon cease to exist," Arnold said after thinking a bit.

"I kind of assumed you would have told me trying to blow up the moon was a bad idea," Jake muttered.

"I have no attachment to the celestial object. Meanwhile, I can see the risks associated with an instinct-driven antagonistic planet-sized plant living this close. Especially one that seems to carry an innate hatred for life. Getting rid of, or containing it, might be a necessity, not a matter of your vanity," Arnold said, fully on board with Jake's brilliant plan.

"You wouldn't happen to have a bomb capable of blowing it up lying around, would you?" Jake asked.

“No,” Arnold shook his head. “I will not be able to make one before B-grade either.”

The way he said it made it clear the guy had already very much considered the limits of how destructive bombs he could make. Jake wasn't sure if that should make him worried, but he decided not to be. Just to make a small mental note to not piss off the guy unnecessarily.

“Do you still have the Blackpoint Nanoblade Katar?” Arnold asked after a bit, changing the topic entirely.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I do,” Jake nodded, surprised, as he took out the weapon and quickly checked it out.

[Blackpoint Nanoblade Katar (Ancient)] – A katar with a nanoblade made of a composite alloy formed into an ultra-thin blade. The blade itself can cut most materials effortlessly but has little to no effectiveness against magical wards or defenses when not infused with mana. The tip of the blade appears to have been touched by the void. A coating on the blade allows it to have an incredibly high level of mana conductivity and can handle most types of mana. The handle contains a series of energy cores capable of storing mana of any affinity. This stored energy can all be released at once through the tip of the Nanoblade. Enchantments: Extreme Conductivity. Blackpoint Burst.

Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race

“Did it serve you well during Nevermore, or did you switch to another weapon?” the scientist asked, as he took the katar from Jake without even asking.

“I used it all throughout,” Jake said. “I even had it repaired... three times? All done through system stuff or on city floors. It did a good job, but – and don't take this the wrong way – it did fall off quite a lot toward the end. Especially the Blackpoint Burst was barely worth using anymore, as I could, in many cases, do more damage without it, and the slight wind-up time made it difficult to even land. But the katar as a whole was still damn sharp and did its job the whole time.”

Jake had genuinely liked the weapon. It was a real stabber. When he first entered Nevermore, it was sharper than even Eternal Hunger, though by now, there was a vast gulf between the two weapons, with the mythical Eternal Hunger having far surpassed the Nanoblade in every area. Not surprising, considering the weapon was constantly growing the more Jake killed and the more souls it ate.

"That's only to be expected," Arnold said as he inspected the weapon, finding quite a few chinks in it from the many years of use. "Do you need it currently, or may I have it back for a time?"

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

"You're gonna upgrade it again?" Jake said with a big smile.

"No, I'm going to melt it down and make an entirely new one," Arnold shook his head. "The methods used during this one's creation process aren't up to par anymore. However, I shall analyze its Records for use in the creation of the new katar."

"Fair enough," Jake nodded. "I would be more than happy to get a weapon upgrade before the Prima arrives. Do you need any payment or...?"

"I already owe you for the Automaton Spaceship," Arnold said, as he pointed and made a wall see-through, revealing the giant spaceship behind it, with robot arms poking it all over, doing science stuff. Jake had naturally already seen it in his sphere, but observing it with his eyes was still impressive.

"In that case, thanks in advance," Jake smiled. "I'll be in Haven for the most part should you need to contact me for anything."

"Very well," Arnold nodded.

Having nothing more to talk about, Jake headed out and back to his little lodge. He was still impressed by how utterly massive Haven had become, and it was honestly to the level where it made Jake a bit uncomfortable. One thing was for sure, it was good Miranda was the person actually in charge of everything and not him.

Returning to his lodge, Jake didn't wait before heading down to the alchemy lab in the cellar. The last time he was there, he hadn't really checked out every room, but this time, he did. One room he had remembered was the basin room or whatever it was called. It was a room with a lot of different basins Jake had planned to make and store different liquids in large quantities inside.

He hadn't ever really used it, but now, he believed it would be perfect because he knew what he wanted to spend the next two or so years working on:

Acids.

Jake had only begun to touch upon it during the House of the Architect and realized how well his arcane affinity synergized with that particular branch of alchemy. It would be a waste not to explore it further. The large basin room, with several different square basins sectioned off by glass walls, would be a perfect place to test things out and store different acids.

This was one of the contraptions Hank had proudly shown off during his tour of the place after Jake came back from the Treasure Hunt. Arnold had helped make it with the glass walls and stuff, and it being glass walls was honestly perfect. That meant Jake only had to put down a glass bottom of every basin, and he would have perfect containers for acids.

As of right now, not all the different sections were raised, but a few were, and one of them even had water inside it. That's when Jake remembered what he'd done when he was here way back then. Checking out this particular section, Jake saw a stone lying at the bottom of the water as he smiled and shook his head.

[Dewstone of Serenity (Legendary)] – A small stone created by the combined effort of a group of water nymphs to help heal a close friend. This stone was eventually acquired by a powerful vampire and brought to Yalsten, where it has been ever since. Will passively transform surrounding water by infusing the power of serenity into it. Effect lessens, and the transformation process becomes slower the larger the pool of water. Has many alchemical uses

"Yeah, I had completely forgotten about that," Jake said to himself as he also checked the water itself.

[Concentrated Serene Water (Epic)] – This water calms the mind of anyone who consumes it, allowing them to more easily focus while suppressing the effects of most mental afflictions. Will restore a bit of mana, health points, and stamina upon consumption. Continued consumption will help heal some soul injuries. Has many alchemical uses

"And I'm pretty sure that was only rare rarity before. I guess it grew more potent over time, hence the "concentrated" tag," Jake continued muttering.

This was a nice little pleasant surprise that really shouldn't have been a surprise at all, but Jake blamed the way the system improved memory. You had to think about something to remember it, and Jake sucked at thinking about stuff not related to his immediate surroundings or current situation.

"Hm, maybe I should clean up my spatial storage at some point," Jake said to himself before quickly dismissing the idea. That sounded way too much like work. Better to just leave everything in there till he randomly remembered something. It wasn't as if he had anything important stored away that he should really be remembering, right? Yeah, definitely not.

After inspecting the basin room and taking a swig of the Serene Water for fun, Jake finally went to the large glass bubble serving as the main lab. Inside, things were as pristine as ever, and he was happy to be back in the laboratory. Thus, he gladly sat down and got to work, as it was time to finally make some proper acids.

Well, more proper acids than what he'd made in the House of the Architect, anyway.

"Thank you for your assistance, miss," the big man said.

"Ree," the noble bird answered.

"The upper layers of the sky are difficult to cover, especially as many of the more powerful beings are nomadic in nature and rarely stick to a single area for long," the big man that Sylphie knew was called the Whaleman said.

"Ree?"

"Even if I am a Sky Whale, I cannot cover the entire sky on my own, and I am still more of an aquatic animal rather than an aerial one," Whaleman shook his head.

After Sylphie returned to Earth, the bird really didn't know what she wanted to do. So, the first thing she did was find her parents, whom she hadn't seen in a very long time. In the process, she ran into Whaleman, who knew a lot of stuff and helped track them down. The wind also helped a lot when she

got closer. After Sylphie had gotten that Authority skill, the whispers of the wind were even clearer than before, and sometimes even offered hints without Sylphie asking, so that was nice.

Reuniting with Mom and Dad had been nice. Both of them were getting close to becoming big and strong C-grades like Sylphie. It was a bit slow, in Sylphie's opinion, but Sylphie did know that Sylphie was awesome, so maybe Mom and Dad were just more normal? No, they were definitely better than normal. They were her Mom and Dad, after all.

Sylphie ended up spending about three days flying around with them before they split up again. She was too strong to help her parents in battle, and the two hunted best as a pair. They did have a good time together, but they also all had their own things to do. One thing was for sure: her parents were happy Sylphie was doing well, which made Sylphie happy, and she hoped that her parents would also do well.

With the reunion done, Sylphie had flown back to Whaleman, who was hard at work preparing for when the big boss called a Prima Guardian arrived. He was doing that by ensuring the many powerful beasts spread across the planet wouldn't become too big of a problem, through ensuring they were either killed, made into allies, or pacified through special contract magic stuff the Whaleman could do. Something with him being blessed by a guy called Karroch.

Sylphie, being the best bird she was, volunteered to help Whaleman do stuff. She was super fast and good at finding strong bad guys, and she was also super good at negotiating! Plus, she was strong enough to do stuff only Whaleman or the Whaleman's most powerful allies could do. Whaleman was very convincing when he appeared... because Sylphie was pretty sure Whaleman was the highest, if not one of the highest-leveled creatures on the planet.

[Sky Whale – lvl 333]

Also, even if Whaleman was strong... Sylphie wasn't afraid because Sylphie was also strong.

"Can you handle this area and scout it? It's rather large, but I believe you are more than capable," Whaleman asked, recognizing Sylphie's greatness. "The Crimsonfang Darkbat Lord was last seen in the area east of there, and with its trajectory, we believe this is where It'll be. Also, if it proves too strong, feel free to--"

"Ree," Sylphie interrupted.

“Right, you know,” Whaleman nodded. “Just be careful, alright? I wouldn’t want to face Lord Thayne if anything happens to you.”

Sylphie nodded, understanding him perfectly, as she offered some words of warning. “Ree, ree.”

“... why would he hit me with a cauldron that smells?”

“Ree,” Sylphie shook her head as she took off to find the bad guy bat, leaving Whaleman behind to mutter again by himself.

“I guess you’re right... I wouldn’t want to find out...”

Chapter 915: Holiday Is Over

Time marched on, and even if Jake and the others had returned to Earth, not much had changed besides stability returning to a lot of factions. Arnold’s workshop was once again running non-stop – though, to be fair, it nearly already had during his absence, too – while factions such as the Court of Shadows finally had their Judge and a few elite members back.

Funnily enough, the Court was one of the factions that suffered the most from this stability on the planet. They were, in the end, an assassination organization, so if there was no one hiring assassins, business wasn’t going well. Alas, they were getting by focusing on training and doing hunting jobs of beasts and whatnot, with the occasional job here and there, though it was often nothing consequential, and more often than not, they were hired by the World Council or people related to the Council.

Quite a number of religious leaders and such had been nipped in the bud, but most of them hadn’t been targets worth talking about.

The Fallen King had also found himself a busy Unique Lifeform after returning. It turns out that a supreme tyrant ruling through power doesn’t establish the most stable organization, so after he had been gone for a while, internal competition within the faction he was building had gotten so bad that the Sky Whale had to get involved.

Now that the Fallen King was back, there was a lot to do. Something that actually suited him quite well. During Nevermore, he had few chances to use the aspects of his Path related to being a King, but now that he had a kingdom in ruins, there were ample Records to be reaped from putting everything back together, and he reckoned there were many levels to be gained while awaiting the coming of the Prima Guardian.

Valhal, who had been keeping a mostly low profile after the Ell'Hakan incident, were starting to rear their head a bit after Carmen and other high-ranking members had returned from Nevermore. It wasn't much, but they had recruited a bit and expanded their influence to some more nearby towns – all with permission, of course.

Arthur, the one doing most of the work for the World Council, was the one who had given permission, which was a big development after he had been so firmly anti-divine factions. But, he began to give a few permission to grow and prosper... while hiring the Court of Shadows to handle those deemed on the harmful side.

Other smaller factions were also simply doing their own thing. As an example, Maria – the follower of Gwyndyr – was busy working on establishing some form of mercenary band of her own, while the Noboru Clan was solidifying their own power on Earth now that the Sword Saint was back.

All in all, Earth had only gotten a tinge more busy after the first batch of Nevermore Attendees returned. Things had slowed down after Miranda and many others left for Nevermore, but now things were at least picking up again, if ever-so-slowly. Moreover, as time passed, the day marking the return of Miranda also grew near, as the planet would soon have all its leaders back to finish the final preparations for the Prima Guardian.

Jake dipped the piece of meat in the clear liquid as he observed what would happen. After a few seconds, nothing happened, and he nodded, satisfied. Then, with his other hand, he raised it, and it began to glow green for a moment.

The second it did, the meat was instantly corroded away. Jake's hand glowed green again as he lowered the big piece of meat further, it again remaining unharmed. With a bit of telekinesis, he then lifted a metal rod from behind him and dipped that into the liquid, too.

This rod also remained unharmed until Jake had his hand glow for a third time. As Jake wanted to see, the metal was corroded away while the meat remained whole without the slightest trace of damage.

With a big smile, Jake flashed his hand green one final time as he dropped both the meat and metal rod into the liquid and saw both were consumed.

“Pretty damn good,” Jake praised himself as he picked up the big glass cube he stored the acid in. It was made to slot perfectly into those sections of the basin he used to store all the different acids Jake had made over the last... definitely over half a year. Jake’s sense of time tended to be quite off, but it seemed about right. It had been less than a year, though. Definitely.

This acid he had been working on was an improved version of the Adaptable Arcane Acid he had submitted in the House of the Architect. The Arcane Acid he had made then was pretty good, but it did come with some pretty severe limitations, such as the limit of only being able to switch “target” once. That was the first thing he worked to address. If Jake had more time during the Challenge Dungeon, this would have been the direction of progress he would have walked down, and so far, he was pretty happy with the result as he used Identify on his acid before he put it back in its slot at the basin.

[Controlled Arcane Acid (Rare)] – An acid created from a mix of energy-corrosive ingredients and arcane energy. Upon coming into contact with any energy it has been attuned to corrode, this acid will turn highly destructive but doesn’t react to any other forms of energy. Has an increased ability to intrude into physical objects and corrode the energies within. This acid is significantly more effective against passive environmental energy. This Arcane Acid is highly controllable by its creator and can adapt accordingly when commanded. By default, this acid is in a passive state, where it will not corrode anything, and it will naturally return to this passive state after a while if not actively controlled.

Definitely Jake’s best iteration to date. It was highly malleable, and while it did have some problems, such as not being as effective as the acid he’d made during the Challenge Dungeon yet, due to its higher level of adaptability, Jake was more than satisfied. He believed it would soon be more corrosive than the acid he made then while also being far more adaptable and useable in more situations.

When it came to getting materials, Jake had used some of what he’d already stored up, but otherwise he’d just popped by the Order of the Malefic Viper real quick to swipe some stuff. It also gave him an excuse to check in with Meira and Irin, who both volunteered to help get some ingredients Jake was looking for.

All in all, this had been a productive time, and the shift in environment and momentum in his profession after the Challenge Dungeons he hadn’t really been able to spend was showing, as he’d gained 4 whole levels during this relatively short period of time.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 268 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 271 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 279 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 280 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

While 4 levels may not seem like a lot to many, for a mid-tier C-grade like Jake, it kind of was. Especially when one considered Jake was doing the kind of alchemy that usually didn't give a lot of experience. He would have gained a lot more levels if he'd just only crafted his best Heartrot Poison over and over again while making small improvements. Or, of course, if he'd done some major ritual with potentially multiversal consequences.

But those could wait. For now, he was happy doing some normal alchemy. As Jake was considering how he wanted to refine the acid mixture further, the phone-like thing Jake discovered Arnold had installed in his lab at some point went off. Jake quickly went over and pressed a button as a brief message played.

"They're back from Nevermore."

Alas, the time had come. Quickly cleaning himself off Jake didn't wait as he headed to the lodge above.

--

Miranda stood in the highrise as she overlooked the city Haven had grown into. Further, grown into. It had expanded even further during her time away, which was definitely a good sign. She would be lying if

she said she hadn't expected things to at least go a little wrong with her absence. However, it looked like things had gone smoothly, no doubt partly due to the great work of Holstred, Arthur, and many others.

"I'm feeling all nostalgic when I remember when this was just a small town at most," she smiled at Lillian, who stood beside her. The woman wore a white mask covering the upper part of her face that she'd begun to use after evolving to C-grade. The primary cause for this was the fact that during the evolution, she had done away with her scarred face. That she had promptly then shifted to a mask instead was a bit weird, but Miranda wasn't going to question her assistant.

"We're both old women by now," Lillian smiled. "It's normal to look back fondly on the good old days."

"Bah, we're still young at heart," Miranda shook her head. "Any word from the Sky Whale or Arthur yet?"

"No, but I believe they have been informed of our return," Lillian answered promptly. "Holstred at least said he'd contact them both promptly."

"I see," Miranda nodded. Truthfully, she wasn't in that much of a rush, and in many ways, it was comforting that there hadn't been an entire welcome party occupying her office the second she returned to swarm her with all the issues that had propped up. That meant things couldn't be all that bad. It was especially good to know that her decision to focus on Nevermore while in Nevermore and get everything out of the experience possible had been the right one.

Nevermore had been both a great and a harrowing experience. Miranda had never been an exceptionally skilled fighter. She was more of a prepper. She could set up traps and such, but if she was jumped outside of her domain, she would be in trouble. Nevermore had helped her develop many new tools to deal with disadvantageous circumstances and to fight in any situation.

She and Lillian had not gone to Nevermore together. In fact, Miranda hadn't gone with anyone from Earth at all. Her party had consisted solely of members of the Order. As she wasn't trying to compete on any Leaderboards or anything like that, the levels of her party members also hadn't been limited at all, resulting in one of them being another witch from the Verdant Lagoon who was level 250 and specialized in combat. It was clear her role there was primarily to teach Miranda.

The rest of her party members were the usual setup, but it was never a secret the party was put together by the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon to nurture Miranda. In the beginning, the entire thing was very suffocating, especially as Miranda felt unworthy of being treated so well by others, only made worse by how much she sucked at combat.

But, with time, she got used to it, and they cleared many floors, and Miranda gained quite a few levels. She even spent a bit over five years in the House of the Architect Challenge Dungeon. For reference, as she wasn't competing on the Leaderboards, there were no Nevermore Points or anything like that to speak of, and the only thing you got for a good evaluation was a better reward. Rewards that were still considered far lesser than those offered to the Leaderboards contestants.

Now, after Nevermore, Miranda was pretty confident facing even relatively strong people at an equal level to herself, even without any preparations. With preparations, she doubted any but a handful of people on Earth could beat her. Pretty much all the people who'd placed well on the Nevermore Leaderboards would be able to defeat her, bar maybe a few who would struggle if their fighting styles didn't do well against a witch's domain.

The type of magic Miranda had practiced during the World Wonder primarily focused on using different talismans and such in combat, along with basic verdant magic. However, the biggest aspect was definitely learning how to create and use a mobile domain at any point without any warning. Naturally, this domain would be far less powerful than her usual one, but it was something. This was something she had already worked on long before Nevermore, but now she was actually confident in using it.

Anyway, during Miranda's time in Nevermore, Lillian had gone with a party put together by Sultan, using his connections with the Golden Road Emporium to hire what has effectively highly-skilled mercenaries affiliated with the giant merchant Pantheon. From how Miranda understood it, Sultan had used the fact that Lillian was the right hand of Jake's right hand to ensure they got some of the best they could. Also, apparently, he was in quite good standing with many of the high-ranking merchants after he gave them good information about what kind of presents Jake would like during his Chosen Ceremony. In other words, he had told them that getting Jake slaves would be a bad idea.

To say Lillian had overperformed would be an understatement. It probably shouldn't have surprised Miranda either, as Lillian had always been a very strong-willed woman, but she had excelled a lot more than Miranda expected. After Jake had handed her that Lucenti Mage Tome all the way back in E-grade, she had slowly been growing in power, and by now, she was a respectable mage in her own right.

Jake definitely hadn't known, but the Lucenti Mage class was far from a normal one when he casually handed her the tome. Few classes that relied on celestial concepts and complicated mysticism tended to

be, and Lillian was quite good at it. Plus, unlike Miranda, she never needed any setup, even if it could help her.

Many others had also returned to Earth around the same time as Miranda and Lillian, including Reika, who had gone to visit her great-grandfather and the Noboru Clan. Neil had also returned, having been the only one who went to Nevermore of his original party of five. The reason for this was pretty simple... he was the only one among them who'd reached C-grade then, with only Silas the only other person from the party to evolve since.

After everything had truly calmed down, the other three had more or less retired. Eleanor, the archer, had married a local leatherworker in Haven. Christen and Levi had also settled down in Haven and still lived with Silas, with Miranda not really sure what they were doing. Silas was still working, but he wasn't really doing anything combat-related anymore. He had many helpful support skills from his pretty rare profession and worked for what may as well be called Earth's government. His lie-detection skill alone made him a valuable employee, and his other skills were also handy.

"Do people even know Jake is back?" Miranda asked as the thought suddenly struck her. "Outside of a few people, that is."

"Not as far as I know," Lillian shook her head. "There was no public announcement or anything. However, many do assume he is back, seeing as the Fallen King and the Patriarch of the Noboru Clan both returned, as well as Sylphie helping out the Beast Alliance established by the Sky Whale."

"Makes sense," Miranda nodded. "We could call a meeting. Get everyone up to speed about what's going on and take status."

"Who should be invited?"

"The usual, especially those handling the Prima Guardian preparation. Oh, and having Jake there would also make things easier, if for nothing else but to also have him be aware of what's actually going on with the planet he is supposedly the World Leader of."

"I understand," Lillian nodded, but Miranda kept ranting.

“We need him in the loop anyway, as calling a World Congress before the Prima Guardian would definitely be a good idea. Something that would have been a great privilege to have granted before he headed off to Nevermore so I could call one. Oh yeah, he also didn’t give me permissions regarding Land Division outside of Haven, as well as a slew of other things. Oh yeah, and most of the statistical tools, too! Do you think he even knows he has these tools? Do you think he’s touched his Pylon of Civilization a single time since he buried it under his house?”

Lillian didn’t need to answer, as they both knew. Miranda just sighed a bit as the truth was evident. “I guess my holiday is over, eh?”

“Very much so,” Lillian expressed her sympathy.

Chapter 916: Board (Read: Bored) Meeting

For the record, Jake had never opened any system menu related to him being a City Lord or the World Leader of his own volition. The only times he’d touched them was when Miranda asked for him to do something, and that something was more often than not just transferring rights and permissions.

In Jake’s defense, he blamed the bad UI of the system. How was it his fault the system didn’t have an “allow all” button? At least these existed for some major categories, and shortly after Jake became the World Leader, he went over these and granted rights to Miranda.

The problem was that the UI wasn’t static. New things would be unlocked with time, and how much the “country” or “kingdom” or whatever expanded. At least when it came to all the City Lord stuff, Miranda did have pretty much every permission available, but the permissions given had begun to fall behind severely with the World Leader stuff.

Also, because Jake didn’t have any profession related to City Lord stuff, he had to actually touch the Pylon of Civilization to activate it and see the system interface. Was it enough for him to just touch it with a bit of mana, or potentially even just his presence, allowing him to do it from hundreds of meters away easily, including during all the time he’d spent in his lab?

Well, yes, but Jake didn’t think about it, and that was the defense he was sticking to after he’d gone to talk to Miranda.

Jake was right nearby, so he'd been the first to arrive for their meeting after Arnold contacted him, with others like Arthur, the Fallen King, and Sword Saint needing a bit to get ready.

"So we both agree that we're going back to your lodge to get this fixed here and now while we still have some time?" Miranda asked after a very enlightening conversation.

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said in a semi-joking, semi-meek tone as he scratched the back of his head. "But... can I just add that I think you've done a brilliant job?"

"Well, thank you," Miranda smiled. "Now imagine how much more brilliant it would have been if I didn't have several options unavailable to me as your stand-in World Leader. To clarify, if you wish to take back full control and manage the planet yourself, I would more than happily--"

"Oh, would you look at that? I can give you World Leader permission stuff right here and now without going to the Pylon!" Jake quickly said as he hurriedly found the system menu and began allocating all the new features to Miranda. Seriously, why didn't it just automatically allow her to do all that stuff? He had officially made her his stand-in even by system standards, yet some things were still not granted by default.

After Jake was done, he couldn't help but sigh. "Can I blame the system again? All this should just be automatic..."

"If I may," Lillian, who was now sporting a cool mask – great fashion choice, by the way – spoke up. "Some new features for World Leaders become available that hold quite a lot of power most World Leaders wouldn't ever want to unilaterally grant others. So a manual granting of permissions is likely implemented to avoid problems."

"I kind of get it, but it isn't like the permissions do anything overly dramatic," Jake shook his head.

"You just gave me permission to control practically every single Pylon of Civilization on the planet, and not just their associated defensive barriers, but the ability to simply blow them up, which would cause worldwide panic and the resulting explosions kill thousands," Miranda added.

"And such power couldn't be in better hands," Jake smiled brightly. "Now, let's go to the lodge and get the rest of these dumb permissions granted."

That was precisely what they proceeded to do, as Jake and Miranda quickly popped by his lodge and got all that sorted. On the way, Jake even proposed maybe asking Villy if he had a solution to automate all this granting of permissions, but Miranda made it clear she'd already asked the Verdant Witches and that while it was a bit annoying right now, it would cease to be an issue with time.

The problem was just that their faction was still rapidly growing and in a period of change, leading to many new things happening. Once things like the Prima Guardian were handled and Jake had fully become the World Leader by laying claim to Earth's Planetary Pylon, things should be a lot easier.

Making their way back again, the two also just caught up with everything that had happened to Haven's resident witch. Miranda already knew pretty much everything Jake had done as she got updates every single time they'd stopped by a City Floor. Jake hadn't known much about what Miranda had been up to, though, and he was pretty curious about how she'd handled the place.

When they were back, Lillian also joined the conversation as they waited for everyone to be ready to join for a meeting. Only the three of them, and a few others who would arrive shortly, would be physically present, while the rest would just get in contact remotely.

It was pretty understandable, considering all of them were busy doing their own stuff and pretty far away. Even if they could just use the teleportation network, that would still take some time. Besides, going somewhere for people like Arthur wasn't as easy as someone like Jake. He also needed bodyguards and stuff to come along, making it an entire thing.

On a side note, one of the people who would join remotely was Arnold. Arnold lived only a few kilometers away and could get to the meeting room in a few minutes if he wanted to, but he'd still decided to work from home. Jake very much respected that decision.

Holstred, the guy Jake had tried to prank with Sandy, expectedly entered the room shortly after, along with two people Jake didn't recognize. One of them was a beastfolk man, while the other one was a scalekin. Both of them acted overly polite toward Jake, but he had honestly gotten used to that by now.

Entering the large meeting room with them all, Jake was impressed by everything he saw. It was designed like one of those big board rooms rich people had board meetings in before the system, except they now had the technology to project holograms and stuff of everyone participating.

Miranda directed Jake to take a seat at the head of the table – a seat that was usually left empty, as it was reserved for the true World Leader as a symbolic gesture. Even if he wasn't the one actually leading the meeting or doing much at all, Miranda didn't want to hear any arguments, as it was only considered proper that the one with the highest status would sit there. Jake's offer of just standing in the corner with Unseen Hunter active was also rapidly shot down, so Jake surrendered himself to his fate and took a seat. Beside him, Miranda and Lillian sat, joined by Holstred, the scalekin, and the beastfolk guy.

With everyone seated, Miranda officially began the meeting.

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Projections appeared all around the table as Miranda activated a crystal in the center. Jake saw the Fallen King, Sword Saint, Sky Whale, Arthur, his little brother, and many more familiar faces. Even the pretty shady merchant Renato, who ran Paradise, the city Jake had visited with Carmen during their little road trip way back.

"Thank you all for making time today. As you can see, Lord Thayne will also be attending this meeting, but please do not pay it too much mind, and let us proceed as usual," Miranda opened the meeting. "Let me begin by saying I am more than pleased to see how well Earth is doing even in my absence. Brilliant work. However, I am fully aware challenges may be lurking under the surface, so do not hesitate to bring them up. Now, Arthur, if you would get us all up to speed with everything."

"Of course," the projection of Arthur answered, his voice sounding just like as if he was there in person. "I would also like to welcome Ms. Wells and everyone else back, and I hope you have had a fruitful journey. Regarding Earth, let us start with--"

What followed reminded Jake way too much of those overly long meetings Jacob sometimes dragged him to before the system. That was, in some ways, lucky, as that meant Jake was trained to not zone out too much, but actually listen in case he would be asked to reference anything said in a later report.

Arthur started out by going over a lot of stats. Not the cool kind of stats, like Perception, but boring stats, like housing developments, employment rates, material gathering, birth rates, and a whole bunch of other things. He even had graphs and stuff to show, making it clear he had prepared for this meeting

for a while... or he just kept updated stats at all times. Maybe the latter was actually more probable, considering how much more convenient the system had made a lot of things.

After Arthur, others followed, including some of those who worked with the guy. Renato also joined in to talk about entertainment and the economy, while Holstred touched on the integration of former slaves, joined by the beastfolk and scalekins, who outlined some of the challenges they faced, including quite a bit of xenophobia from humans who didn't like anyone who didn't look enough human for their taste. Elves didn't really face any problems, nor did the few dwarves who had come to Earth. It was primarily the more monstrous races who faced discrimination. Lots of shop owners, adventurer parties, and just people in general were being royal assholes.

Jake had to hold himself back from just suggesting referring these people to the Court of Shadows and dealing with it that way, but the Sky Whale offered some more open-minded solutions. In the end, the conclusion was pretty much that they would actively try to quell these harmful sentiments, with a realization that the more time passed, the smaller the problem would get. The younger generation showed way less apprehension toward dealing with other races, and as the multiverse opened up more, people would have to get used to how the world worked now or get lost.

They could always provide them with totally free one-way trips to the moon if they got too annoying. Just an option.

Once they were done talking about all the overly complicated stuff, they finally got to the topic of the Prima Guardian Preparation Plan. Jake had heard a bit about this plan already, and from the sounds of it, things were going well.

The ones behind the preparations did realize Earth was simply too large to account for everything. There would definitely be some hidden monsters somewhere that could cause trouble for humanity should they side with the Prima Guardian, but there shouldn't be too many. At least not close to human lands. The further they got away from where humanity lived, the less anyone knew of what lived there, though Arnold had tried to map out most things. Jake even came to learn that Arnold had worked with a dozen or so parties specializing in exploration to create a map of the planet with notable locations marked.

The Sky Whale also talked about the sky and oceans quite a bit, where it became clear Sylphie had been quite a help, having spent nearly all the time since they returned from Nevermore hunting down problematic monsters or convincing them to join the light side. Then, there was the entire underground world, which was definitely the least explored overall. Earth was simply too large now, with the planet having tunnels leading all the way to the core. Efforts had been focused on mapping only the upper layers while setting up methods of detection shouldn't anything deemed too dangerous emerge.

All in all, Jake was impressed with all the work that had gone into preparing for the Prima Guardian. He wasn't sure if he should feel bad, knowing how busy everyone had been, especially over the last many months. Someone like the Fallen King had also been busy as hell dealing with monsters and effectively setting up a huge domain of his own in what was once not considered human lands at all.

The Sword Saint was the only one relatable. He had done a bit of stuff with his clan but otherwise focused solely on training. He even spoke a bit about the mythical training formation he had been granted by Minaga and how great that was. Oh, and then he mentioned how he had people go over everything he had gathered in Nevermore within his spatial storage to put it to use... so not that relatable after all. Especially not when he asked Jake if he had time to set up the Minaga's Labyrinth Dungeon he had been given for his top-tier performance in the Challenge Dungeon.

A reward Jake had definitely not forgotten and his explanation that he was waiting for Miranda to return to make the dungeon wasn't just him making up a reasonable excuse on the fly. Nope, Jake would never forget important stuff like that.

Either way, the meeting continued smoothly as Jake learned way more than he needed to about everything going on with the planet. Again, he could only conclude that things were going pretty well, even if there were some major issues they had to address. Jake was honestly impressed with himself for having been zoned in for the whole nearly six-hour meeting because, hot damn, had it been boring at times.

Jake also understood that his own heavy-handed approaches wouldn't work on any of those problems. The only place he could help was with the Prima Guardian preparation, and it didn't particularly sound like they needed help, especially not after Arnold returned. The guy was a one-man army, achieved by deploying a literal army of drones and robots and stuff.

After some final pleasantries, the meeting ended, as Jake had entirely forgotten to bring up one topic. Luckily, Miranda, Lillian, Holstred, and the two with him were still there, even after the projections were gone.

"Things are going better than expected," Miranda said with a smile. "Lillian, inform me when those reports Arthur talked about arrive. Now, let's get out of here, shall we?"

“Just one thing,” Jake interrupted her, earning him a raised eyebrow as the three non-natives of the planet also looked at him with their undivided attention. “Would you find any issues with blowing up the moon?”

Miranda stared at him for several moments before collecting herself. “Why are you asking about blowing up the moon?”

“It’s haunted,” Jake explained with a shrug.

During that day, Jake had spent a lot of time with Miranda, but they had only talked about Nevermore stuff, making him totally forget about bringing up his recent moon visit.

“The moon is... haunted?” Miranda asked, seemingly not entirely sure if she should take him seriously.

“Yep, real nasty haunting too. A powerful B-grade has integrated with the core,” Jake further explained. “Ah, this isn’t a rush-job... I doubt it’s feasible to handle the situation before B-grade. Or maybe I can do it at peak C-grade, but either way, it won’t be for a while. Suffice to say, things didn’t end well when Sandy and I visited.”

“That... alright, it actually makes sense,” Miranda nodded. “I take it this B-grade is contained for now, and it won’t be a problem with the Prima Guardian?”

“It won’t,” Jake shook his head.

“Great,” Miranda said. “In that case, do as you see fit, as long as it doesn’t result in giant moon rocks destroying half of the planet or something in the process.”

“It should be fine,” Jake said with a shrug as one other concern struck him. “Say, Lillian, would it negatively impact you if the moon is gone? Seeing as you’re walking down a Path related to moonlight and all.”

“Not at all,” Lillian answered, as she explained: “The moon is more of a conceptual representation rather than a physical object. It’s all about visualization and understanding the underlying concepts of lunar

energies and other concepts. If I wasn't able to perform without a physical moon, I would have been quite a burden within Nevermore, wouldn't I?"

"That's good to know," Jake smiled. Thinking back, it wasn't like there had been a real moon in the Lucenti Plains with the Great White Stag, either.

"What you said also just reminded me," Miranda said with a frown. "You said the Chosen of the Lord Protector had gone to the moon with you, but it seems no one has heard anything since. Do you know why no one can locate the Chosen?"

"Oh," Jake said casually. "It's because Sandy died."

Chapter 917: "Let the construction begin!"

The phrasing of words is essential when communicating; everyone knows that. Jake was quite known for sometimes not thinking through what he was saying, but sometimes, he knew exactly what he said. Sometimes, it was just really fun to fuck with people a bit, especially when what you said was entirely truthful.

Miranda had simply given him too good of a setup for Jake to miss the opportunity. It was just perfect. The reaction of Miranda was great as her eyes narrowed in confusion and disbelief... with the one from Holstred and the two who had arrived with him just pure gold as their eyes opened wide as if they had just heard something they really shouldn't have.

"Jake... what exactly do you mean when you say that the Chosen of the Boundless Hydra died?" Miranda asked after a bit, having clearly sussed out that Jake was messing with her somehow.

"Well, what happened is that we went to the moon," Jake began.

"Right."

"And then Sandy wanted to explore the core and met the B-grade ghost haunting the moon deep inside the thing," he continued.

Miranda nodded.

"This ghost then killed Sandy," Jake finished.

"To fully clarify, is the Chosen dead as of this moment?" Miranda sighed.

"No? Not right now, as far as I know."

"Then how exactly was the Chosen of the Lord Protector considered dead?"

"By being killed," Jake shrugged as if she was asking the most obvious question in the world.

"But they are not dead anymore, correct?" Miranda said with a high level of exasperation.

"Sandy got better."

"Right... right," Miranda nodded slowly. "So, to conclude, the Chosen is not actually dead. So where are they right now?"

"Went back to the Order to recuperate. Turns out dying isn't healthy for you. Who would've known?" Jake said with a grin.

"Okay, this was a very enlightening conversation," Miranda said, as he saw a glint in her eye that made Jake aware she wanted to make him do work stuff. "Now, what's this about us having to discuss setting up a Minaga's Labyrinth?"

As she asked, she also threw a look at Holstred and the two others, making them bow and leave. This left only Jake, Lillian, and Miranda remaining in the meeting room. Jake had feared he wouldn't escape having to set it up now after using Miranda's return as an excuse for not having done it yet.

"See, while it may have been an excuse I made up in the moment, I do actually think it's something worth discussing with you," Jake said in a pretty serious tone. "In fact, I'm pretty sure I told Minaga back when I got it that I would likely just hand it to you."

"We both know it's more likely you would have forgotten all about the item. Anyway, I have heard a bit about these Labyrinths while at Nevermore. If I remember correctly, they are temporary dungeons that contain an image of Minaga within, with some of the better ones even having a real clone. However, I'm not sure they can be truly viewed as strategic resources. As far as I remember, they have limited usage and a relatively short duration they can exist," Miranda said.

"Yeah, about that," Jake scratched the back of his head. "The one I got is a bit better than the average."

Jake took out the funny-looking statue of Minaga giving two thumbs up as he shared its details with Lillian and Miranda.

[My Very Own Top-tier Minaga's Labyrinth (Unique)] – Is that a dungeon in your pocket, or is it just me? Finally, a solution to missing the wondrous Minaga has been found, as you now have the opportunity to place your very own Minaga's Labyrinth wherever your heart desires (conditions may apply). When placing the dungeon, you must choose a suitable location. The nature and design of the dungeon may be modified upon placement with advice from the Minaga clone within. This Minaga's Labyrinth is of the top tier, allowing you to customize far more options while expanding the size of the dungeon significantly. As a top-tier Minaga's Labyrinth, sections within the Labyrinth can cross grades. Note that the dungeon must be maintained after placement, and should it run out of power, it will disappear forever. As a top-tier variant of Minaga's Labyrinth, it does not have a built-in expiration date.

Requirements: Soulbound.

The two of them read it carefully, as Lillian commented: "I do think that reached the level of being considered a high-value strategic resource."

"Right," Miranda nodded. "It's... a lot different to others I have seen. Especially the part about not having an expiration date and the ability to have parts of it cross grades. Dungeons with creatures of different grades are incredibly rare, especially when you reach the higher grades."

"So, we all agree it's good stuff," Jake smiled. "Now we just need to decide what to do with it. Where should we place it? What kind of dungeon should we make with it? Input for design? Lots of questions."

"Hm," Miranda muttered. "A thought just struck me... doesn't Arnold, the Sword Saint, Sylphie, Carmen, Maria, Caleb, the Fallen King, and a lot of others also have their own Minaga's Labyrinths to place? I have yet to hear of any of them placing theirs yet."

"Maybe they just forgot they had it," Jake shrugged, having very reasonably concluded the most likely reason.

"I highly doubt that," Miranda sighed. "Contacting them and having some kind of cohesive placement strategy may be an idea."

"That sounds like a plan," Jake smiled. "See, it was smart of me to have completely forgotten the thing."

"Sure," Miranda didn't even want to argue. "Lillian, can you reach out to those with Labyrinths? Also, Jake, do you know if anyone else has top-tier ones like yours?"

"I think Sylphie does," Jake answered, remembering she also got a 25% amplifier. "Maybe Arnold? Not sure, though. Both of them did extremely well in the Challenge Dungeon."

"I will reach out to them," Lillian agreed. "But, if I may, could I suggest perhaps not placing Lord Thayne's Labyrinth in Haven? The city is already highly congested, and placing a dungeon that will undoubtedly attract even more attention and will only exacerbate this issue."

"Right," Miranda agreed, Jake also nodding along as she probably, no, definitely, had a point there. "Then also consider looking into a good site to place the Labyrinth. Perhaps several Labyrinths if we wish to have them in the same area."

"Labyrinth City," Jake joked, though he knew it probably wouldn't end up being a joke.

They talked a bit more but decided nothing more would be done for now.

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With all that handled, Jake felt like his social battery was well and truly spent for the day. Miranda also knew this and said she would contact him once there was any update on the Labyrinth situation or if she needed him for something. She did seem a bit surprised Jake was actually spending time in Haven and not at the Order, which was definitely proof Jake had spent too much time away from Earth even before Nevermore.

Jake returned to his laboratory and got to work on his acids once more. He had a feeling that he wouldn't have as many relaxing days as before Miranda returned, but what can you do about it?

Days passed before Jake was expectedly contacted and asked to be somewhere a week later. This week also quickly went by before Jake set off to somewhere he hadn't been before. Apparently, there had been a lot of talks about where to place this Labyrinth City – a name that had somehow become official – and in the end, they'd settled on a small town not far from the headquarters of the Noboru Clan. This is to say that Labyrinth City would be well and truly within the territory of the Sword Saint's clan and also managed by it.

Getting there was pretty easy, as the small town of only about five hundred people already had a teleportation circle placed there. The town was placed in an area right next to a large mountain range with powerful beasts on the other side, making it a popular place to stop by before hunting across the mountains.

When Jake arrived, he was surprised to see that Miranda and Lillian really had gathered quite the group. All the expected people from the post-Leaderboards reveal get-together were there, including even Sylphie, who happily flew over to Jake when she saw him. Even Arnold was there in person, having been dragged out of his workshop. There were also some unfamiliar faces who had also done Nevermore and tried to compete on the Leaderboards.

Jake was the second-to-last to arrive, as Caleb was a bit late, but at least he had the excuse of having a kid at home.

"Thank you all for coming," Miranda said with a smile as she directed her attention to those who hadn't also been at the board meeting. "It's good to see some familiar faces I haven't met in a long time."

A few pleasantries were exchanged before they got down to business and discussed how they actually wanted to do this entire Minaga's Labyrinth thing. With several labyrinths available of many different tiers, it was only natural to specialize some of them and not have too much overlap.

Of course, doing all this without having full knowledge of what exactly the Labyrinths were capable of was quite difficult, but luckily, they had an expert in the matter available.

Because, it turns out that part of the preparations over this week had been to place down a projection circle to allow a certain someone to participate. Jake honestly shouldn't have been surprised when he saw the familiar four-eyed Unique Lifeform appear as a projection in the middle of the small meeting room.

"Bow before me, mortals," the voice of Minaga echoed through the room as he turned toward Jake. "Oh, and hi Jake, short time no see! You know, because any passage of time feels short to me because I'm immortal."

"Can you turn it off?" Jake asked as he looked over at Lillian.

"Hey! That's super rude for someone making time in their busy day to help you!" Minaga complained.

"You're right; we shouldn't take up your valuable time," Jake wholeheartedly agreed.

"Well, too late now because I've already cleared out my schedule, so you're stuck with me," the Unique Lifeform crossed his arms.

"Fine, have it your way," Jake relented with a smile.

"Minaga wins once more! Anyway, I got the gist of it. You want to create an entire city centered around my Labyrinths – very flattering, by the way – and for that, you requested some advice on what kind of design you want for each Labyrinth, right?"

"I greet the All-God Legion, and it is precisely so," Miranda said with a polite nod.

"Alright, let's first see what we have available," the projection said as Jake and everyone else presented their statues. Jake saw that while Arnold's was the second best among all of them, it was still worse than Jake and Sylphie's.

"Hm," Minaga said after inspecting all the statues closely. "Damn, I look good, don't I?"

"Are you sure we can't turn it off?" Jake turned to Lillian again.

"Anyway, we have a few options available to us, but may I offer a suggestion I doubt you've considered?" Minaga asked, entirely ignoring Jake's comment.

"Sure," Jake answered instantly, also fine with moving on.

"Instead of making a bunch of small Labyrinths... make one big one," Minaga suggested with a big smile. Miranda looked surprised, with others also frowning or raising an eyebrow.

"How could any of us have even considered that, seeing as nothing had ever suggested that was even an option?" Jake asked with exasperation.

"I did say I doubted you had thought of it, didn't I?. Also, it isn't usually an option either," Minaga proceeded to explain. "Inside of every Labyrinth is usually one of two things: either an image or one of my clones, with my clones appearing in the good ones. These clones are usually A-grade, sometimes S-grade, if I felt frisky about it when making it. The hawk got an S-grade within her Labyrinth. However, for yours, Jake, I-"

"Put a god-level clone inside," Jake cut him off.

"... do you take pleasure in taking the winds out of my sails?" Minaga sighed.

"Yes."

"Fair enough," Minaga shrugged. "My point is that the god-level clone is a bit more capable than usual. There are still many limitations, but extracting the energy from several of my idols to create one large Labyrinth with many different sections is more than possible."

"How precisely would this look?" Miranda questioned. "If I recall, dungeons usually have requirements to enter, so how would it differentiate between those of higher or lower grades?"

"The requirement to enter will be based on the lowest grade available there," Minaga explained without any sass. "Different parts can then be further sectioned off. Honestly, there are a lot of options available. I do have some system limitations, too, but know that this is one of the only ways to create a dungeon where, say, a C-grade can fight B-grades."

"What is the minimum requirement you can make the Labyrinth?" Miranda continued.

"E-grade."

"E-grade?" Miranda asked, surprised. "That low? But won't that cap off the difficulty at a relatively low grade?"

"It would if this was one Labyrinth and not several fused together," Minaga shook his head. "With all the idols here, I can make one going from E-grade all the way to B-grade. B-grade included. Oh, and that is the cap, by the way. Can't make it have anything A-grade inside. Blame the system for that one, not me."

Jake had a lot of questions still, and so did others, as Minaga had an entire Q&A about the plans the Unique Lifeform clearly had considered long before even coming here. Or, he was really quick on his feet to think through ideas... actually, that second one seemed entirely possible, considering he was literally a god with who knows how many clones.

At the end of the day, they decided to let Minaga be in charge of most of it. There were some very valid concerns raised, such as the fact that fewer dungeons would result in fewer titles for completing them, which was a sacrifice there was just no way around. Then there was the fact that maintaining a mega-complex dungeon like what Minaga suggested was something that no one on Earth was even close to being capable of. This Minaga quickly proposed a solution to by promising a lifetime warranty, where he would send "repair-Minagas" to maintain it.

The plans of creating a city with a bunch of different Labyrinths had quickly morphed into something quite different. Jake also knew this wasn't something normal at all but a very special offer from Minaga

to create a unique Labyrinth dungeon for Earth. Another tourist trap for the planet, if you may. Perhaps for the better, as it would distract people from wanting to visit Jake's lodge.

Placing the dungeon itself was actually pretty simple, at least Minaga assured them it was:

"I can change the entrance point object a bit within the set area where we place the dungeon, but personally, I recommend at least a twenty-meter tall, highly decorated marble gate. Oh, and make it gilded in gold for proper aesthetics. Naturally, a large grand structure should be constructed around this gate, serving as a landmark that can be seen even from space. If you need me to do any poses for reference, I am naturally available. I even heard Earth has quite the sculptor, though I fear he only does works of Primordials," Minaga went on a long rant, where the only valuable information was that the entrance object wasn't a hundred percent set from the moment they created the dungeon.

This allowed them to not delay as they selected a large open spot relatively close to the mountains. While they ignored most of what Minaga said, constructing a grand building around the entrance was a plan, with current thoughts to build it into the mountain. Of course, with how dungeons worked, they could just place a free-standing wooden door on an open field, but everyone, even Miranda, wanted to make something more grand out of it.

In the large open spot, Jake took out his statue that would serve as the base. The projection of Minaga's clone had shown them a pretty simple magic circle they quickly drew, allowing the Unique Lifeform to do his thing even from another universe using the idols as mediums.

Once all the idols were placed, Jake activated his statue to create a dungeon. At the same time, the magic circle came to life as Jake's statue absorbed all the other ones, and a new projection appeared in the sky of a new Minaga. This one felt far different from any prior, and he knew it was the one in charge of the coming Labyrinth.

"The time has come!" the projection said with a big smile, as out of nowhere, he pulled out a yellow hard hat and put it on. "Let the construction begin!"

Chapter 918: Union Oath 2.0

Was Jake going to question why Minaga had a yellow hard hat, or how he even knew what a yellow hard hat was? No. Was he going to point out how absolutely ridiculous the Unique Lifeform looked with it on his head, as it clearly didn't fit properly? Yes, of course, he was.

Jake stayed at the construction site for a little while as the projection of Minaga in charge of construction just stood there, seemingly doing stuff behind the scenes. After a bit, it became clear that he couldn't actually let anyone inside the in-progress dungeon quite yet, but he could make holograms and whatnot of what he was making for others to give live feedback during construction.

Miranda and a few others remained to consult with him as Jake decided there was no real reason for him to stay. According to Minaga, it would take quite a while before anything was ready, and it definitely wouldn't be complete before the Prima Guardian event was already over. For now, all they could do was wait as the Unique Lifeform did his thing, with the Sword Saint looking into getting a top-tier builder team on the structure that would serve as the dungeon entrance.

Ah, but there was one kind of interesting question asked by a beastfolk who had managed to do well in Nevermore and gotten an idol of her own. She was one of the "elites" sent by the United Tribes and pretty strong in her own right. She did seem to have a lacking understanding of Minaga, though, based on her question:

"Should we not also turn the surrounding structure into a temple celebrating the All-God Legion?" she asked, being deadly serious.

"Yeah, no, I don't do temples," Minaga quickly shot the idea down. "I don't do worshippers in general. Faith has nothing to do with my Path at all. All the faith I could ever need, I get from myself. Well, my other selves. We like to believe in each other."

"You're just feeling salty you can't give out Blessings," Jake pointed out very accurately.

"Neither can you, but you don't see me calling you out for it," Minaga rebutted.

"I'm not a god."

"Oh, and now you're stereotyping, eh? Why, are all gods supposed to be able to give out Blessings? That's just pure prejudice right there, and you should feel ashamed," Minaga shook his head in overexaggerated disappointment.

"In my defense, I'm only prejudiced when it comes to you," Jake smiled.

Either way, the conclusion was that Minaga didn't want a big temple to celebrate him. He wanted a large building to instead commemorate the Labyrinth he was making. A pretty respectable attitude in Jake's mind, to prefer people to praise not him as a person, but the dungeon he had created. Alright, he did want them to then praise him for being such a good creator, of course, but the point was that Minaga wanted recognition for something he'd done and not just for existing.

After everything seemed settled, Jake hung out a bit more with some familiar faces before everyone headed back to do their own thing. Everyone was preparing in their own way for the Prima Guardian to arrive and had taken time out of their day for this Labyrinth-creation day. Jake did have to admit that it felt a bit like a waste of time for everyone to go, but seeing as the idols for the Labyrinth were all Soulbound, they had to show up.

Jake didn't leave the newly named Labyrinth City on his own, though. A certain hawk decided to join him as they decided to do something Jake was reminded of recently when he couldn't easily contact Sylphie or even feel where she was when he prepared to head to Labyrinth City:

They were going to remake their Union Oath.

The reason it hadn't been remade yet wasn't just because of Jake being forgetful, though that did play a factor. It was also because when he did remember, he didn't want to be the one to bring it up. To Jake, Sylphie was like a niece. She was family. Asking her to redo the Union Oath felt like overstepping to him, especially when one considered the limitations of the skill.

Sylphie could only have an Oath with one person at a time, and who was Jake to assume it would be him? She was free to make it with anyone she wanted. The benefits of the Union Oath were originally to allow Sylphie to do certain system events, but Jake doubted that would apply much anymore, as there were no indications she couldn't participate in the Prima Guardian event.

However, Sylphie had asked him to remake it. Jake didn't know if this was partly with the pressure of Stormild or something, and it honestly wasn't his business either. He did insist on only making a temporary Union Oath like the first one, though. These Union Oaths were supposed to be for life, and Jake wasn't going to lock down Sylphie. He wanted her to have ample opportunity to change her mind in the future.

Heading back to Haven using a few teleporters, Jake and Sylphie headed straight for his lodge. On the way, Jake decided to ask a certain someone if remaking the Union Oath temporarily was even possible, seeing as the only reason it had been temporary in the first place was due to him.

"Hey, Villy. During the last Union Oath, you interfered and kinda helped half-break the thing... can you do that again? Or is it possible to do a halvesie Union Oath like last time?" Jake asked the snake god.

"To be clear, it was you who broke the ritual the first time around. I just swooped in to exploit what you broke for my own benefit. Secondly, rather than doing a new Union Oath, it should be possible to rely on the Records of the first one to recreate it, with all its benefits and demerits. Just ask Stormild once you do the ritual," the Viper answered, putting Jake's mind at peace. Partly.

He still remembered his first time dealing with Stormild, and it had been... something. Trying to get a read on the massive living natural disaster was quite a difficult task, though she had seemed quite helpful the first time around. Her flighty personality just made her a handful.

Once back at Jake's lodge and the two of them were inside, they didn't beat about the bush as Sylphie reminded him what he had to do:

"Ree, ree," she explained.

"Right, place my hand on the magic circle and accept the prompt. I remember," Jake nodded. "Let's hope Stormild is nice this time around."

"Ree," Sylphie argued that Big Bird Stormild was always nice.

"Sure, sure," Jake smiled as Sylphie did her thing. Her entire body began to glow as Jake felt powerful magic at play. Compared to back in D-grade, Jake now had a far better grasp of just how high-level the small ritual circle summoned was. Truly the work of a Primordial.

Reaching out, Jake touched the magic circle as the prompt appeared:

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Do you wish to begin the ritual to enter a Union Oath of Stormild with Sylphie? NOTE: Both parties can exit the ritual at any point until the final Union Oath has been made

The answer being obvious, Jake agreed as he once more felt like he existed in two places at once. He was both inside the lodge, and his soul floated as a soul form within a vast starry sky of nothingness. In the space, he couldn't see Sylphie right away until he noticed: the wind all around him, in this entire detection range, carried her aura.

A powerful gust swept through as all the wind began to gather before forming a small hawk. Jake and Sylphie exchanged glances as they looked at the one other thing in this space. A giant tablet with a title on the top.

Union Oath of Stormild

Last time, the rest of this tablet had been entirely blank; however, this time, there were what looked like outlines of runes still remaining toward the top. Jake quickly gathered these were the remnants of the Union Oath they had before and the one they hoped to effectively renew. The entire tablet also looked more worn than last time, with small cracks around the corners, as if it was damaged. Seeing as this was a representation of the Records of the Oath, it wasn't entirely wrong to say it actually was damaged.

"Quite the mess, eh?" a voice suddenly said as a small orb of burning wind appeared between Jake and Sylphie, making Jake instinctively shy away.

Quickly gathering himself, Jake answered: "The tablet?"

"Yepsie," Stormild agreed as the orb morphed into the form of a burning wind bird. "Ah, I don't blame you. I blame Vilas."

"Ree?" Sylphie questioned.

"No, I could fix it, just not sure you want to? You want to do a renewal, right? Renewing an eternal oath is kind of funny, isn't it? I think it is," Stormild said in her usual childish tone. "Anywho, if I fixed it, we couldn't renew the old one, now could we?"

"Ree," Sylphie agreed before adding: "Ree, ree?"

"We could do slight alterations like that to it, sure," Stormild agreed. "But both parties have to agree, and it does seem a bit silly and not at all how the Union Oath is supposed to work."

"I'm, of course, fine with it," Jake said, as the suggestion was excellent. Sylphie had proposed to change the Union Oath to include terms for breaking it, actually putting them into words. From what Jake had gathered, these terms were usually something like one party trying to kill the other or doing something that caused a certain level of bad karma between the two of them.

For the record, you couldn't do terms that were just "one party wants to break it off."

It had to be more complex than that for the system to accept breaking an otherwise unbreakable bond. For the karma thing, as an example, the bad karma would need to be at a level that would only come from either party killing close family members of the other or doing something so morally incomprehensible the other simply found it unforgivable.

Of course, the Union Oath would usually be broken before these things happened simply by the fundamental promise of the Oath being broken. At which point the one breaking the promise in the Union Oath would already be dead.

The thing is... due to how Jake and Sylphie's Union Oath worked, all of the usual terms and conditions applied by it were a bit wishy-washy, and death was never even on the table. Its effects were also lesser in every way, but so were all the downsides. One such lessened downside was that the terms for breaking it could be far less severe, allowing them to simply settle on a term for breaking that wasn't overly harsh.

Still, the terms weren't nothing. Sylphie proposed that should she think Jake was really a baddie, the Oath would break. At the same time, should Jake think Sylphie was an enemy, it would also break. No questions, no nothing. This was a simple condition and was effectively an anti-betrayal clause. Seeing as their original Oath was pretty much just to be friends, Jake wasn't sure how much this small extra clause even did, but having it put into words couldn't hurt.

Sylphie hadn't made it with that in mind, though. She did it for the upsides. Because it also meant that should they continue to be close, the new Union Oath wouldn't automatically expire for a far longer time. It was still not going to last forever, but far more than just a few years like the last one.

"Alright, alright, I'll help," Stormild said as the Primordial threw Jake a look. "Ah, and make sure Vilas knows that should he interfere again, I'll crush your soul projection so hard it's not gonna be fun for you at all. Okay?"

Jake knew this wasn't an empty threat as he nodded. He also felt that Villy wasn't going to do anything, which was definitely the best for Jake's long-term health. The words of Stormild also made it very clear that even if a lot of factions wanted Jake and would be angry if he died or got crippled, Stormild didn't care in the slightest.

"Ree!" Sylphie scolded Stormild for the threat, as the Primordial backed off a bit.

"I didn't say I'd kill him! Just give him an owie for acting like a baddie."

"Ree."

"What do you mean that's fair?" Jake mumbled, as he really

made sure Villy wasn't going to try anything.

"Great! Then let's get started with the Union Oath renewal!"

Jake and Sylphie nodded as Stormild got started.

"Ahem," Stormild said as the entire tablet lit up. Words reappeared as the Primordial asked in a serious tone. "Do you, Awesomest Uncle Jake Thayne, take Bestest Bird Sylphie to be your Forever-Friend, and do you agree that should you become a baddie in the eyes of Bestest Bird Sylphie, you are no longer Forever—Friends and the Oath will be undone?"

"I do? Yeah, I do," Jake agreed, a bit confused until he remembered the initial wording of their Union Oath. A simple promise to be Forever-Friends... oh well, it had worked, hadn't it?

"And do you, Bestest Bird Sylphie, take..."

Stormild asked the same thing of Sylphie, as she also agreed. The light of the tablet intensified, and a final system prompt popped up in front of Jake to indeed confirm his decision, proving whatever Stormild had just done was pure theatrics.

They both naturally agreed, and Jake once more felt the Union Oath be established. He also felt his own heartbeat speed up slightly, but he kept it under control. He wasn't going to fight anything this time, and compared to the first Union Oath, his reaction was far less extreme. Stormild also clearly chose to stay out of the Oath entirely but was more of a facilitator than a guarantor – which was also the primary reason the Union Oath didn't have any punishment should it be broken.

Feeling the connection once more made Jake smile. He also vaguely felt Sylphie be happy about it, proving the Oath had been a great success.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, thanking Stormild.

"No problem, no problem! Just keep working hard, okay? You already claimed Authority, which is a super good start and mega impressive for C-grade!" the Primordial said. Jake was still far from sure what an Authority was, even if Sylphie and that Wintermaul elemental from the Nevermore get-together had mentioned it. All he knew was that it was a good thing.

"Ree!" Sylphie gladly accepted the praise.

"I don't really have any big pieces of advice to offer except to never become a slacker! Unless you're really tired, then slacking off for a little while is totally fine, but then you have to come back and have super much energy after, alright?" the Primordial whom Jake really had a hard time taking serious continued.

Sylphie just nodded as if such advice was entirely unneeded. Which is probably was. Sylphie was always full of energy and definitely not the type to begin slacking off. And if she did...

"Oh, trust me, I'll make sure she doesn't become some freeloader," Jake assured the elemental Primordial.

"I'm not saying she has to be as zealous as you... just not lazy," Stormild muttered. "Anyhow, Union Oath over! Bye, Sylphie, I'll keep your uncle for a second!"

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched while raising a wing to wave goodbye. With that, she disappeared, leaving Jake alone with the Primordial, giving him a bit of a deja vu from the first Oath.

The moment Sylphie was gone, Jake felt the entire atmosphere shift. It turned incredibly serious as the burning bird of wind looked at him. "You and Sylphie have both grown faster than I expected. Startingly so. I have also heard of your other exploits, and while I don't care much for the Nevermore stuff, am I right to assume Sylphie was your first creation using your talents as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins?"

Jake, going along with the more serious mood, nodded. "She was. My ability was not the only factor, but I'm certain she was affected."

"Good. The progenitor of any Path is advantaged," Stormild said in a pleased tone. "That was all I really wanted. Do treat her well, for she intends to treat you well."

"Of course, I will," Jake answered, almost offended she felt she even needed to say that.

"Good, good. Oh, and do say hi from me next time you meet our mutual acquaintance!"

"The Viper?" Jake asked, unsure who she was talking about.

"No," the Primordial simply said.

"Then who?"

"That's for you to find out, isn't it?" Stormild said in a teasing tone, before throwing Jake soul out and back to his lodge, as Stormild once more proved themselves quite a handful to deal with.

Chapter 919: Prima Guardian Preparations

"How the hell am I supposed to say hi to someone for you if you don't tell me who..." Jake grumbled as the damn birdbrain didn't make any sense at all. He genuinely had no idea who she was even talking about... it could be so many. Maybe another Primordial, seeing as Jake had met, like, half of them during Nevermore? Some Void God was also entirely possible... or maybe Artemis? It could even be that Wintermaul elemental, in case the one who'd blessed that guy was closely related to Stormild. Wait, it could definitely also be Minaga. Both Minaga and Stormild were chaotic as fuck.

Shaking the thought away as it really wasn't worth dedicating any brainpower to, he turned his attention to Sylphie, who looked curiously at him. "Ree?"

"No, just Stormild messing with me," Jake sighed. Yeah, that was his conclusion, even if the Primordial could have actually meant something with her words. He really wasn't a fan of people acting mysterious just for the sake of acting mysterious.

"Ree," Sylphie responded.

"Yeah, not surprising an elemental spirit likes to mess with people," he just agreed. Jake also took a moment to really feel the Union Oath once more. It was odd. When it disappeared, Jake hadn't really missed it overly much, likely because he still always had the Golden Mark of the Fallen King to find and contact Sylphie quickly.

Then, after Nevermore, they quite frankly all could do with a bit of time apart to do their own thing. Now, it felt oddly comforting to have it back, though. Sylphie also seemed happy, which made Jake happy in return.

"So, what are your plans now? Gonna continue to help Whaleman?" Jake asked the hawk.

"Ree, ree, ree," Sylphie confirmed. She also told him some interesting details he hadn't heard before. Sylphie had recently adopted the role of primarily hunting elementals and given them stern talking-tos. Elementals tended not to be very good at listening, and even if they were intelligent, they were more akin to children than adults.

Some more adult-like elementals - such as the water elemental at the harbor town Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie had stopped by on their way to Paradise - were already working on taming the elementals close to human land. At the very least, the elementals were trying to eliminate them as threats to humanity.

Elementals trying to control other elementals was a lot easier than beasts trying to control other beasts, primarily due to their lower level of intellect. If a smart and powerful water elemental entered a group of dumb water elementals, these other water elementals would instinctively begin to follow the smart one.

Sylphie was this concept taken to the extreme. Other wind elementals practically worshipped her. She even told him of the time she went to the cloud islands that had drifted away from hanging above Haven a while ago. All the Cloud Elementals, Storm Elementals, and other variants were incredibly subservient to Sylphie without her even needing to do anything.

Maybe it has something to do with that Authority skill, too?

Jake questioned himself without having any means to confirm. Sylphie also had no idea when he tried asking her, either.

"Seems like you got a quest ahead of you," Jake smiled, happy Sylphie had something to do.

"Ree?"

"I'll just stay here, I reckon," Jake said. "Gonna do some alchemy and be available for when people start returning to Earth. Jacob, Casper, Eron, and many others will make their way back for the Prima Guardian event, and I want to be ready for when that happens. Or, at the very least, be within quick flight distance to help Miranda when the time arrives."

"Ree," Sylphie nodded in understanding before waving her goodbyes... but not before flying by and stealing one of Jake's time bananas.

Speaking of the time banana musa. It had grown a little, so that was great. Not much else had changed, though. Truthfully, it would have been weird if the musa had experienced any great changes in less than a year, as these things tended to take their time growing.

Anyway, with Sylphie gone, Jake returned back to his laboratory beneath the lodge as he didn't have any more obligations for now. With Miranda back, he also felt a lot more assured that things would be handled elsewhere, and he also trusted that there wasn't really anyone capable of making trouble for her. At least not anyone where Jake's skill set of beating people up could help, as he trusted she could do that herself. She had genuinely impressed him with her progress, but not as much as Lillian.

Both of them had grown strong. They still weren't absolute top-level geniuses, but Jake could see Miranda reach a level where pretty much no one her level stood a chance if they entered her domain. He recalled the Dark Witch and her simple domain that already made her a lot stronger and more difficult to deal with. Adding someone with actual intellect and cunning to control such a domain was just straight-up a nightmare.

Lillian was a far more classical mage, but she still gave off an odd aura and was far from actually being a normal mage. Both of them were the kind of mages that didn't really fight people straight-up but did weird shit to win. To be clear, Jake was totally okay with that, as long as they weren't his enemies, because damn did he hate fighting super-tricky opponents. To date, Valdemar had still been the best kind of foe there was: just a dude with an axe who was really strong.

Inside the laboratory, Jake refocused and went back to his acid project again. He did plan on spending the last half a year or so specializing in creating his most powerful iteration of Heartrot Poison yet. While he didn't know for sure the Prima Guardian would be a flesh and blood Vitality-based lifeform, Jake heavily assumed it was based on how most of the Primas had been beasts. It really wouldn't make much sense for a big robot to suddenly appear... but if it was a robot, then hey, he had something to test his acids on.

With a loose plan in mind, Jake delved into his alchemy once more, as there really was little more to do now than wait for the system event that would decide the fate of the planet. Oh, and greet his acquaintances and friends as they returned to the planet.

As Earth was making its own preparations for the Prima Guardian to arrive, so were all the other planets in the ninety-third universe. The ones that had enlightened ones who successfully united under one banner anyway. Planets like the one Draskil came from had effectively fallen already and were now ruled solely by beasts.

Many other planets that had technically united still faced huge challenges, as even if the World Congress had elected a World Leader, that didn't mean all civil unrest was addressed.

Especially not when one introduced the powderkeg that was people returning from Nevermore. People, more powerful than ever, some of whom had finally hit their stride, were not satisfied with their stations and were now grasping for organizational power. Many changes of leadership happened across the multiverse, and multiple factions appeared, battling it out even if they were meant to work together in preparation for the system event.

For the smaller planets, with less area unexplored, they could perhaps make do even if there was internal chaos. However, for others, this led to their chances of handling the Prima Guardian significantly falling.

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As per the system message during the final mandatory World Congress, the power of the Prima Guardian also scaled with how many Primas had been killed and the overall performance of the people on the planet during the initiation. So, when some people had to abandon the planet – not unlike how the Holy Church and Risen had left Earth – after having killed some Primas, it could cause an imbalance between what the planet looked capable of beating and what they could actually beat.

This method of scaling was also a boon to some – assuming the goal was just to beat the Guardian - if a lot of people from their planet had left to become more powerful with divine factions, having thus killed fewer Primas. This was naturally with the expectation they would return.

Of course, the power of every individual planet wasn't necessarily the only deciding factor. There was also the entire Prima Guardian Alliance – an aspect of the upcoming event Earth had voted not to take part in. At the cost of splitting rewards, this would allow several planets to band together and assist one another. Meanwhile, Earth would not be able to interact with this alliance before they had killed their own Prima Guardian.

All in all, there was a lot going on with this event, but at its essence, it was pretty simplistic:

A powerful boss would appear, and the people on the planet have to defeat this boss along with an army of undefeated regular Primas who had grown more powerful while away. More beasts would likely join them, making it only reasonable to prepare by ensuring that not too many or too powerful beasts would join the Primas. This entire army and the Prima Guardian must be defeated within five years, or the Guardian will claim the Planetary Pylon.

Should the Prima Guardian take over, no one truly knew what the result would be. Perhaps they would enslave the enlightened races, kill them all, or become some sort of benevolent leader, meaning having the Prima win was actually the best outcome imaginable. Or, you know, it could just make the planet go boom.

The point is, no one knew. Not even the gods.

All of these system events during the initiation of a new universe were unique. They did share some similarities here and there, allowing some of the oldest and most knowledgeable gods to theorize, but having a reasonable theory was far from the same as actually knowing.

This Prima Guardian event also being linked to a World Wonder, was something never seen before during any initiations, adding even more interest. As hinted at already, chances are individuals could take control of parts of the World Wonder. With time, perhaps even the entire World Wonder. With how things were playing out currently, it was reasonable to assume one potential method to take control was through these system events during the initiation. That was an utterly massive incentive to get involved, even for the largest of factions, as controlling a World Wonder was simply invaluable.

Yet even with this divine influence, the chances weren't good for some planets across the Milky Way... at least it didn't look like it was initially. But they all had one hope. The most powerful of planets tended to vote for dealing with the Prima Guardian themselves to get the most rewards, just as Earth had. However, there was one exception to this. One pinnacle planet that had voted to join the Prima Guardian Alliance and become their leader and symbol of hope:

El'Hakan.

Despite his homeworld being more than fit to solo the Prima Guardian, he had joined the alliance. After he returned from Nevermore, the belief in his skills had grown to newfound heights, as they placed all their trust in him. While he hadn't beaten the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, he had proven himself second of the entire multiverse this generation. He had proven himself more than capable.

Of the planets across the Milky Way that had joined the alliance created by the system, nearly five hundred were now already under his banner. A massive coalition, controlled by the Chosen of Yip of Yore, with many of the gods supporting Yip, having blessed people on the many planets, as it quickly became clear this alliance was morphing into something more than simply a temporary alliance to defeat the Prima Guardian.

It was Ell'Hakan laying the groundwork for the eventual galactic politics related to the Seat of the Exalted Prima... and who knows, there might even be a Galactic Congress in the future.

Months passed, and Earth only continued to improve. People were also still coming back from Nevermore throughout this time, but there was no turmoil or anything caused by their return. Even people who had left to be with their divine factions in other universes began to make their way back to participate in the upcoming system event.

Their return was once more partly due to the lack of information. Nobody knew what the rewards for this event would be, and no one dared risk missing out on something that could be significant and reward great Records. It was entirely possible that merely participating – no matter how minor your role – would earn you a title or something like that. Many even hoped they could ride on the coattails of the ridiculously powerful people on the planet and get partial credit for defeating a Prima Guardian that was definitely close to the highest difficulty one would find in the ninety-third universe.

While many relatively unknown people returned, many known figures also began to make their way back, or at least been polite, and announced their return to Miranda. Casper had contacted her and given an actual estimated time of arrival, where he also explained it wouldn't just be him coming.

Tens of thousands of Risen would return to Earth in what had to be a massive undertaking. But, not knowing if the rewards would be worth it, it was something they chose to do.

It was also hinted that the group was as big as it was because they wanted to set up a permanent outpost on Earth should they succeed against the Prima Guardian. Even before they officially proposed this as an option, the World Council was in tentative agreement it should be allowed, even if their presence didn't come without... let's just say, challenges.

Miranda was already stressing a bit as there really weren't many Risen on Earth after Casper and the others left. There were only a scarce few, and there were no whole towns or anything like that with only Risen. She had also spent a lot of resources dealing with all the damn xenophobia of both the Earthlings and many of the freed slaves, and having Risen to now also deal with was an entire thing. They were a far more unpopular race across the multiverse than nearly any other race, besides maybe ectognamorphs.

The Risen were not as hated as the damn vampires they already had plenty of, though. A race the Risen also historically didn't like.

Oh, and then, to make matters even worse, Jacob applied to return together with a group from the Holy Church. It was the kind of request that was overly polite from their end, promising gifts and compensation for allowing their visit, making any form of rejection an obvious "fuck you" to the largest faction in the entire multiverse. Something that Jake would have been fine doing, but Miranda had enough diplomatic sense to know there was nothing to be gained from offending them needlessly, so she accepted their application. Though, contrary to the Risen, she had no plans of offering them the possibility of having an outpost after the event was done.

So, to summarize, there would be Risen, vampires, and people from the Holy Church - all supposed to be together, fighting the Prima Guardian. This was despite the Holy Church and Risen both having standing kill orders should one spot any vampires. Yeah, Miranda definitely had her work cut out for her, but hey, dealing with all this was great for her level. Not as great for her general stress level, but the levels made it worth it, right?

Other less controversial individuals and factions also announced their return. Eron would return with only a dozen or so people who belonged to the Dao Sect. They were people Miranda hadn't even known were originally from Earth, and quite frankly, it didn't matter much. The Dao Sect was perhaps the most neutral faction in the entire multiverse, never really getting involved in anything big or causing any trouble.

All in all, this system event would be a massive reunion of everyone from Earth. The ridiculous fighting power they would display was also almost comical, and Miranda genuinely looked forward to seeing what the event could possibly throw at them that Earth couldn't handle.

She assumed the answer was that they could handle the Guardian... which was why she was already looking ahead and making plans. But all of that was for after their own Prima Guardian was confirmed dead. For now, the most immediate thing was making sure all the people who would visit for the event didn't end up killing each other before the boss even arrived.

However, while they waited for many of those who had announced they could come, the first to arrive was someone Miranda hadn't even really considered, and someone Jake wasn't even sure would come. No, someone he wasn't even sure could come.

It was still a bit less than half a year till the Prima Guardian, and Jake had just begun his Heartrot improvement spree when he was contacted by Miranda. However, even before she contacted him, Jake had this weird itch that was explained when he heard the message:

“Sandy has returned to Earth... bringing along a certain Vespernat Hive Queen.”

That’s right, Vesperia had finally come to Earth.

Chapter 920: Insecurities

While Jake had thought about Vesperia coming to Earth, and it was even theorized she could, he hadn’t actually known it was possible before now. What’s more, Sandy had returned with her, making it a double-whammy of creatures he had partly helped “make” come to the planet.

“Where is she and Sandy right now?” Jake quickly used the magic telephone Arnold had installed in his lab to ask Miranda.

“They already left and are heading your way, sho-“

Right then, Jake saw a giant worm appear above his lodge through his sphere. He smiled and cut off Miranda:

“They’re here, thanks for telling me, and good luck with... stuff!” Jake said as he also cut the connection without admitting he genuinely had no idea what Miranda was dealing with these days. Hopefully fun stuff.

Hurrying up from his laboratory, he saw how Sandy struggled to find a good place to land without breaking anything. The valley Jake’s lodge was placed in wasn’t that large, and Sandy eventually shrank down a bit before finally touching down on the soft grass.

Getting outside, Jake smiled as he saw the giant worm. “Hey, Sandy! You look all healed up.”

“Eh, I’m getting there. Still rebuilding stuff. Next time we go on an adventure, I would prefer if it didn’t end with me dying,” Sandy answered.

"Can't make any promises," Jake joked. "I heard you also brought along Vesperia?"

"Oh yeah, I did," Sandy confirmed. "She's just finishing up some work inside one of my stomachs. Did you know she also has a stomach-like thing for all her bug friends? Well, more bug slaves, but my point is she also got a big subspace."

"I knew," Jake nodded. "What are you having her help with?"

"Convinced her to leave one of her spawns within one of my stomachs to create stuff. Very efficient at gardening and stuff like that," Sandy explained. "Also, quick question, you're her dad, right?"

"I... won't really say that's accurate," Jake muttered. "Not really. I don't actually think there's any normal word for the kind of relationship we have. Calling me her creator also feels wrong, so I really don't know what you would call me."

"She calls you Sire. So I guess you sired her?"

"Again, all of those things feel very weird to put into words," Jake sighed. "Anyway, back to you! Have you remade that resurrection egg yet?"

"Nope, gonna be a while. Super expensive to make and damn time-consuming. They also take this kind of special resource that isn't even a real resource that shows up anywhere. I just know when I'm low on it, and it regenerates super-duper slowly, even if it is sped up when I get levels and stuff," Sandy explained. "It's a bit hard to understand, so it's all good if you don't get it; all I'm saying is that the egg isn't ready yet."

"Pretty sure there are few people who understand better than I do," Jake smiled, as Sandy had effectively just explained his Jake Juice. And no, Jake wasn't going to explain back in kind, nor would he use the term Jake Juice, as that would definitely get a lot of comments and jokes from Sandy.

"If you say so..." Sandy didn't really seem to take his words seriously. "Oh! Vespy is nearly all ready!"

"Vespy?" Jake raised an eyebrow.

"A cute nickname for my little sister," Sandy joked.

"You do know that if you insist she is your sister, that would mean Sylphie is your big sister," Jake pointed out.

"Seeing as I don't come from an egg, I was born before she was, making me the older sibling among us all. Checkmate."

"Recently, there was also this Demon Lord..."

"Doesn't count," Sandy left no room for argument. "Besides, Vespy is fine with me calling her Vespy, so you don't get to complain. Also, here she comes."

Sandy opened their mouth before Jake could say anything more as the familiar yellow figure of Vesperia appeared before him. She still towered over him and wore a silken dress with a striped black and yellow bee pattern. Or, well, perhaps calling it a wasp pattern was more accurate.

"It's good to see you again," Jake said with a smile as he looked up at Vesperia. He saw her antennae twitch a bit as she also smiled.

"It is likewise a pleasure to meet you once more, Sire," Vesperia answered. She seemed a bit nervous for some reason. Jake couldn't even begin to guess why, as he really couldn't see any reason why she would be, and he chose not to mention it.

"How have you been? Did everything go well when you returned to the Endless Empire? Did your sisters, the other True Royals, treat you properly?" Jake asked a slew of questions. Vesperia did look like things had been good over the last few years, but he still felt the need to ask.

"Yes, they have all treated me most excellently," Vesperia answered in her usual polite tone. "I have also laid claim to much of my heritage that was left behind when the last Vespernat Hive Queen fell. All of my sisters have been incredibly supportive during this entire process and helped facilitate my growth as much as possible."

Jake nodded, happy to hear that things had been good. She definitely wasn't lying about the growth either... in fact, she was higher level than he was.

[Vespernat Hive Queen – lvl 284]

It was so high that Jake couldn't help but wonder:

"Wait, have you gone to Nevermore?" Jake asked, clarifyingly.

"No, and I likely won't," Vesperia shook her head. "The World Wonder does not fit me or my Path much. Going there would also be seen as a massive risk, and finally, we True Royals have many secrets we wish to keep hidden from others. Secrets that we do not wish to reveal to the Wyrmgod for him to spread to the highest bidder after the fact, especially not to the Automaton. No, my growth in level has come nearly solely from growing into my powers and accepting part of my heritage."

"I see," Jake nodded. Yeah, Jake doing Nevermore had definitely revealed many of his secrets to the Wyrmgod and others. Some things would still be kept hidden, but a lot had been shown off. One also had to consider that many of Jake's secrets were related to his Bloodline, and not even the Wyrmgod could fully analyze and detect what that did during the World Wonder. The same wasn't true for True Royals, who relied on system-based skills.

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Finally, the Wyrmgod would also be more willing to keep secrets for Jake due to Villy. The Primordials all had some odd bond and a lot of deals and whatnot, something the True Royals didn't have. So, yeah, he could see why going to Nevermore was a huge risk that Vesperia or any True Royal quite frankly had no reason to take.

It wasn't like Nevermore was mandatory in any way. To the vast majority, it was just a good leveling spot, and a way to bang out some dungeon clears for the Dungeoneering title. Vesperia could clearly level totally fine on her own without relying on that based on her progress so far.

"But I heard you have done quite well in Nevermore," Vesperia commented after a bit. "In fact, as well as anyone possibly could."

"Could have gone worse for sure," Jake jokingly downplayed the entire thing.

"That is an understatement. You know, many of my sisters weren't keen on me going to Earth initially, even if it was to participate in a system event, but when I left, none of them were voicing words of protest anymore, only well-wishes for my journey," the True Royal said, shaking her head. "The Endless Empire truly does want a good relationship between them and you, using me as the binding agent."

"Well, as long as you're part of the Endless Empire, we're automatically on good terms," Jake shrugged.

Vesperia took a second before she smiled and nodded her head again. It was also only now that Jake had noticed she had lowered herself to be about the same height as him by going down on her knees. Jake wanted to point it out but didn't.

"I do fear that it could cause problems with the Automate if you state that publicly..." she said, a bit worried.

"Eh, It'll be fine," Jake waved it off. "As robots, they should have enough logic to know that even if I'm on good terms with the Endless Empire, that doesn't automatically make me an enemy. Shit, I'm good friends with both Risen, vampires, and those from the Holy Church. I am using the Viper's peak strategy to attain perfect neutrality by pissing everyone off and making friends with everyone at the same time. All while trying to make myself someone really risky to outright make an enemy."

Hey, it worked for the Viper, so it should work for Jake. Sure, it did make the Viper some enemies, like Yip of Yore and all his cronies, but wouldn't life be boring if you didn't have at least a few people gunning for you?

"There certainly are a lot of people unwilling to make you an enemy for no reason and even more wanting you as an ally," Vesperia said in a slightly relieved tone. "I just want to ensure I'm not imposing on you."

"Of course you're not," Jake shook his head, not even sure why she would say that.

“Nevertheless, the other True Royals were also concerned that me being here so openly could create diplomatic challenges, so to hopefully make up for any problems my presence might cause, I’ve brought along some gifts. They aren’t something you, Sire, can use but more something to support the budding empire you are constructing. We have already left the spatial stone with your assistant... Miranda, I believe,” Vesperia continued.

“Not really making an empire, but sure, I’m sure Miranda will be happy with any resources she can get,” Jake said. “I am curious, though, what kind of stuff did you bring?”

“Primarily formation blueprints and materials to make the formations. There were naturally also a great number of metals, gems, wood, bones, leather, carapace, and many other raw resources to support the growth of Earth.”

“Sounds like good stuff,” Jake nodded, unsure if it was actually good stuff.

“Outside of these gifts, please let me know if there is anything I can directly assist you wi-“

“Why are you being so weird toward me?” Jake suddenly asked, having finally gotten enough of Vesperia acting off. “You’re being overly polite, and almost... see, that’s what I’m talking about.”

As Jake spoke up, he saw Vesperia become quite nervous as she fidgeted a little. Her antennae were practically vibrating, and her eyes kept darting around during their entire conversation, not to mention how she looked like she had no idea what to do with her hands. Then there was the fact she had taken a weird kneeling position to have her head slightly lower than Jake’s. It was all super weird.

“I... I did not mean to cause any dissatisfaction... I-“

“She’s nervous because she hasn’t seen you in a long time, especially compared to the time you spent together. She already felt insecure if you really needed or wanted her in your life before leaving for the Endless Empire, and you seem to only have grown more powerful and influential since then with all the Nevermore stuff, making her even more insecure now. Pretty sure Vesperia has a strong innate need to feel needed and useful, and you have shown no indications of needing her for anything substantial,” Sandy jumped into the conversation as Vesperia looked panicked, whipping her head around to look at Sandy.

“You! I confided that to you in confidence, I-“

“Jake is a bit of a dum-dum and doesn’t have proper worm-level intellect, so you need to be straightforward with him at times,” Sandy said, making Jake feel pretty insulted as he was already processing the first thing Sandy had said.

“Still... I don’t want to...”

“Jake, stop acting dumb and give her head pats already!” Sandy yelled, throwing Jake out of his thoughts.

“That’s not what I-“ Vesperia protested.

“Oh, if you dislike those, Jake should make sure to never give you any ever again,” Sandy shot back.

“I didn’t say-“

Jake finally interrupted their conversation as he reached over and placed a hand on top of Vesperia’s head as he spoke with a hopefully comforting smile. “While it pains me to admit, I am a bit slow on the uptake sometimes regarding things like this.”

Vesperia didn’t say anything but only lowered her head as she blushed. Jake couldn’t help but shake his head as he saw the movements of her antennae, making him ruffle her hair.

“I feel like I need to apologize for you not feeling comfortable to just talk to me if you felt nervous or insecure,” Jake said after a bit. “But I can say that you have no reason to be nervous. Also... I won’t just trust Sandy’s words for everything, so please just talk to me, alright?”

Seconds ticked by as Jake kept patting her before Vesperia finally spoke. “The Boundless Hydra’s Chosen isn’t entirely incorrect...”

“Just call Sandy, Sandy,” Jake said in a calm tone. “No need to act overly polite toward that big worm either.”

“Seconded! It’s super weird that my little sister Vespy calls me with some long title,” Sandy jumped in again to support Jake. “And as your older sibling, let me once more say... just be candid, alright? That works best with Jake here.”

“Alright...” Vesperia said, obviously trying to calm herself.

Jake just sat there for a bit, giving her time. He did feel bad about making her feel insecure and nervous despite knowing it wasn’t really his fault or something he could have done anything about.

It took a bit longer before Vesperia finally spoke, having gathered her thoughts. “I... feel like I’ve only caused trouble for you so far. I forced you to reveal your identity as the Chosen of the Malefic One, forced you to openly disclose abilities of your Bloodline, and even made potential enemies for you, all simply for existing. Meanwhile, I’ve done nothing to assist or benefit you in any way. I wanted to pay you back, but I truly have no idea how to do so meaningfully. I can’t see why you would need me or what value my presence adds, as you have proven yourself more than capable all on your own. I... am questioning why I even came or why you would want me here.”

Jake didn’t interrupt as she spoke, even if there were many times he wanted to interject. When she was done, he let her words hang in the air for a moment before talking:

“You are right, I am more than capable on my own,” Jake said, as he felt Vesperia fidget slightly. “And as you said, I don’t need any of you. The key word here being: “need.” Me not needing you, Sandy or almost anyone doesn’t mean I don’t want you around. I don’t need you to add some tangible value or offer me some boon for me to want you here. We’re kind of family, aren’t we? You just being here is more than enough.”

Vesperia slowly nodded, pushing her head slightly up into Jake’s hand. He quickly understood as he started rubbing her hair again.

“Now, me not needing your help doesn’t mean you aren’t allowed to help,” Jake smiled. “In fact, I’m pretty sure there are plenty of things you can help me with. Just helping those around me also indirectly helps me, and I’m certain you are capable of quite impressive feats. In fact, I’ve been looking forward to

hearing and seeing what you're capable of after having had some time to do your Hive Queen stuff. Of course, only if you want to show me."

The True Royal finally looked up, her face entirely red, as she clenched her fists. "Please let me show you my abilities!"

So... yeah, Jake wasn't a psychologist or therapist or anything like that, but he was pretty sure Sandy had hit the nail on the head when the worm said Vesperia had a strong innate need to feel needed and helpful.