

## Hunter 921

### Chapter 921: Hive Queens Are Scary

Jake and Vesperia hadn't ever really spent that much together, and he truly didn't know what she was actually capable of. All he had seen from her was her ability to enter fighting mode, which ultimately wasn't her main power.

She was a Hive Queen. A living one-woman army that commanded an entire hive of powerful insectoids to overwhelm and slaughter anyone who dared oppose her. Her personal ability to fight was a last resort or to be used only alongside her workers and soldiers. Well, primarily soldiers, Jake reckoned, as workers were meant to stay back at the hive.

Now, after a few years, Vesperia had plenty of time to learn more about her abilities, but more importantly, to actually create some creatures for her hive. Something she enthusiastically wanted to show off.

"My internal space serving as a temporary hive has expanded significantly as I have progressed through C-grade, and I have even absorbed unique treasures provided to me by the Endless Empire to facilitate further growth. This has led to me having an internal space capable of storing at least a few million creations, though I have far from filled it up. To do that, I will likely need some more Hive Queens to assist me," Vesperia happily explained, as Jake nodded along with interest.

"Have you made any more Hive Queens yet?" Jake asked.

"Only two so far, and both of them were made without any fertilization," Vesperia answered nonchalantly. "I find it too early for me to look into any potential mates. Besides, if they are too weak, their Records will only end up weakening the Hive Queen."

Yeah, Jake wasn't going to touch that topic with a ten-foot pole. He sure as hell wasn't going to discuss Vesperia's potential love life, though going by the tone she spoke with, it didn't seem like she viewed the act of fertilization as anything that had emotions involved in it. It was purely a way to potentially improve the Records of a Hive Queen.

"One of those Hive Queens is in my stomach right now! I'm making a wasp farm!" Sandy added happily.

“That’s nice,” Jake said with a smile. “How about the second one?”

“Would you like to see her?” Vesperia asked. Jake nodded his head without any hesitation, quite curious for sure.

“Do note this one is still very young,” she said, as Jake felt the movement of magic. That is also when he learned that the way Vesperia summoned things from her internal world wasn’t just like pulling stuff out of spatial storage.

A large yellow spinning portal appeared, and a few seconds later, a pretty damn massive wasp walked out. It had no humanoid features at all but just looked like a big wasp with a surprisingly huge thorax compared to the wasps he usually saw. Jake also felt that this Hive Queen was barely in C-grade and not particularly strong either... likely because it was focused on tending to and expanding hives.

[Vespula Hive Queen – lvl 208]

It was even an entirely different race. A Vespula Hive Queen. Still a wasp but far from a True Royal. Jake wasn’t disappointed or anything, though. The mere fact Vesperia could create a creature like this all on her own, possessing a full Truesoul and being its entirely independent being, was incredibly impressive.

“She hasn’t had time to learn to change her form yet,” Vesperia quickly clarified as she looked at the large warp.

The warp bowed its head toward Vesperia before it looked at Jake. “I greet the Sire of the True Royal.”

Yeah, Jake definitely shouldn’t be surprised the big wasp could talk and responded politely: “Nice to meet you, too.”

“As you can see, despite being young, Hive Queens are born with the same innate knowledge that I was, albeit far less. She is only a year old and already ready to establish her own hive once a suitable site is found,” Vesperia explained.

“I see,” Jake nodded, impressed.

Could he just mention how fucking scary eusocial insects like Vesperia were? She could create creatures that could make more creatures, creating a massive army within only a few years. He totally understood why many sought to eradicate any ectognamorphs once discovered on a planet, as should they go uncontested, most planets would be overrun.

“Alright, please return to the Internal Hive,” Vesperia said to the young Hive Queen. It bowed its head once more and quickly walked back through the portal, which did make Jake wonder...

“Say, can others enter the portal? Could I?”

“I apologize, that’s not possible. Only creatures I have created can enter. Even that Hive Queen cannot make any spawns within, and I wouldn’t be able to house anything she makes in the future either,” Vesperia said very apologetically as she deflated a bit.

“Why apologize? That’s not necessarily a downside. It means the space is far safer by default, and enemies have no possible way to sneak in and hurt the young within. In fact, I would say it’s a feature more than anything else,” Jake said, shaking his head.

Vesperia smiled as his words quickly pepped her back up. “Hive Queens are far from the only spawns I have made. Actually, they are the only creatures not truly part of the Vespernat Lineage.”

She proceeded to bring out more wasps to show off. Three pretty different insects appeared, all with varying names, looks and purposes, their races pretty explanatory.

[Vespernat Soldier - 267]

[Vespernat Worker- 255]

[Vespernat Pollinator - 248]

All of them looked purely like insects. The Soldier was the biggest of them at about three meters long, and it definitely looked designed to fight. The Worker and Pollinator looked a lot less dangerous,

especially the Pollinator. Rather than a wasp, it looked more like a cross between a wasp and a bumblebee, with its many soft hairs, making it look pretty cute.

“These are some of the common drone variants I can create,” Vesperia said proudly as she proceeded to briefly clarify some more ectognamorph things.

These three weren’t like the Hive Queen in that their souls were a bit... lacking. They were the same as the termites from that hive back then. They relied on the Queen and didn’t have the intelligence to act on their own. Should Vesperia fall, they would also cease to function and quickly just die.

This did come with some upsides, though...

“While I am still lacking, I am up to around two thousand Soldiers, five thousand Workers, and a few hundred Pollinators,” Vesperia said with a sigh as if that wasn’t already a fuckload.

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Jake raised an eyebrow, surprised at the number. “How many of those are C-grades?”

He could already imagine... If just a tenth of them were C-grades, that meant she had an army of two hundred C-grade Soldie-

“Oh, those are the C-grades. Counting D-grades and below, I have approximately fifty times that,” Vesperia clarified.

Jake stared a bit as he processed this. Even if these Soldiers were weak variants compared to regular beasts... that was still a fucking army, wasn’t it? What’s more, she genuinely didn’t think this was a lot?

Again... Hive Queens are fucking scary.

“That’s quite the army,” Jake said after a brief pause as he processed Vesperia walking around with a few hundred thousand insects in her pocket. He did have one more thing he wondered, though. “Do you have more powerful variants?”

“Two more,” Vesperia said. “Royal Guards and Queen’s Guards.”

“Damn,” Jake muttered. “How many of each?”

“Twenty-six Royal Guards and four Queen’s Guards,” Vesperia answered.

Sending back the three drone variants, a new specimen appeared that looked a lot different than anything prior. These did not look much like wasps at all but reminded Jake far more of how Vesperia looked in her warrior form. They each carried what looked like stinger spears, as well as carapace shields, and they walked on two thin legs. Their far bulkier forms than Vesperia in her warrior form, as well as them not giving off the same kind of scent – likely pheromones of some kind - made Jake wonder something as he also used Identify.

[Vespernat Royal Guard – lvl 274]

“Are these males?” Jake asked curiously.

“Yes,” Vesperia confirmed. “Royal Guards are those among a brood who failed to fully mature into Queen’s Guards, hence why they are males.”

Jake nodded as he kept observing the five Royal Guards Vesperia had summoned to show off, ignoring the fact that in ectognamorph society, males tended to be the half-cooked specimen. A very matriarchal society that one. Focusing on the Royal Guards, they were impressive indeed and even pretty powerful variants. They are at least above average, and dealing with an entire army of them would be quite the challenge.

Dismissing the Royal Guards, Vesperia finally brought out her biggest guns: the Queen’s Guards.

The four of them were about six meters long, and they looked a lot like regular wasps except massive. No, perhaps calling them hornets would be more accurate, seeing as they had far darker colors and looked more aggressive. One big difference was that their mandibles were far larger, and their legs looked almost metallic, reminding him a bit of the Hive King from the termite nest.

Then, there were, of course, their stingers. They were not as puffy but longer in shape, with a very pointy tip. Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper also made it very clear that there was some nasty venom on the other end – something that wasn't really unique to Royal Guards, as most wasps had venom.

Anyway, the entire bodies of these Queen's Guards looked made for combat, and even their antennas were glowing with magic. Healing magic, as far as Jake could tell. These weren't low-tier variants at all but were powerful in their own right and would no doubt be considered high-tier elites worth nurturing if they were part of any faction. He doubted their level of teamwork was anything to scoff at, either. Even their levels made it clear they were far from weak.

[Vespernat Queen's Guard – lvl 282]

[Vespernat Queen's Guard – lvl 280]

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These four huge Royal Guards sat passively on the lawn, not doing anything as if waiting for Vesperia to give them any commands.

"I can only create four Queen's Guards currently with my abilities, and the rest of my elites will have to be Royal Guards," Vesperia explained. "I can make way more of the regular drone variants, as they barely consume any Hive Energy to maintain. Ah, Hive Energy is a special resource I have that dictates how many I can spawn, and everything that isn't its own separate Hive Queen counts."

"You sure learn something new every day. Also, I do wonder... why do the Royal Guards have humanoid forms while these four look perfectly insecty?" Jake asked.

“Oh, that was just a choice for this demonstration, and due to the peculiarity of the transformation of these guards,” Vesperia said as she looked at the four Queen’s Guards. “Transform.”

Instantly, they reacted as all four of them grew in size, and within seconds, they turned into carbon copies of Vesperia in her warrior form. Even their auras changed to resemble hers, and without his Bloodline, he wasn’t sure he could have told the difference. Jake even tried using Identify...

[Vespernat Hive Queen – lvl 284]

“Are these...?”

“Look-alikes,” Vesperia said, smiling. “A tried and true strategy of old.”

“That’s... impressive,” Jake said, as he kept comparing the four of them to Vesperia. “Are these also considered drones, or?”

“Partly,” Vesperia clarified as she motioned toward one of the Queen’s Guards, who promptly spoke:

“We live to serve the Queen and have the required mental faculties to do so efficiently,” she spoke in a voice that was even identical to Vesperia’s.

“Having a look-alike that couldn’t even act like me wouldn’t be a very good one, now would it?” Vesperia said proudly. “You four may return to the hive.”

The four of them nodded and went through the portal without saying anything more. After they left, Vesperia closed the portal again.

“Ah, I should mention their ability to mimic me isn’t a known ability and shouldn’t be shared, as it would make it far less effective,” Vesperia casually clarified that she had just revealed one of her big trump cards.

“Of course I won’t share anything,” Jake reassured her.

"I totally would if they had the right bribe," Sandy also decided to jump into the conversation. "Ah, who am I kidding. I wouldn't do that to my little sister Vespy."

"That actually reminds me," Jake said, looking at Vesperia. "Are you alright with Sandy calling that nickname? I know that Sandy can be a handful, and I would gladly give the big worm a stern talking to."

"It... it's fine," Vesperia said a bit shyly as Sandy jumped right back in.

"Vespy is also having mixed emotions about having her own name already and you not naming her like the rest of us. Seeing as your naming convention sucks, Vespy totally sounds like the name you would have given her if you had been the one to decide, so me calling her that makes her feel like we're all closer," the worm once more inflicted panic upon Vesperia.

"... if you want me to also call you Vespy, that's totally fine?" Jake muttered. "And... well, that probably is the kind of name I would have given."

"Make it a special family name!" Sandy wriggled happily.

"I... I would be fine with whatever Sire wishes to call me," Vesperia said.

"That means she wants you to call her Vespy as that sounds way more familial," Sandy just wouldn't let up causing Vesperia mental attacks.

"Vespy it is then," Jake smiled as he saw Vespy blush, making him instinctively reach up and pat her head. Her only response was to lower herself a bit, making it easier for him to do so.

"I must say, your abilities surpass my expectations," Jake said happily while still rubbing her hair. "You really are a one-wasp army. Do you also remember what we talked about earlier regarding you helping me with something?"

Vespy's head instantly shot up as she looked at Jake. "What is it?"



Jake smiled and shook his head and pulled back his patting hand – much to Vespy's disappointment - before explaining. "While preparing for the Prima Guardian to arrive, we are addressing as many potential risk factors as possible. The skies, seas, and land are very much covered, but the subterranean world is still mostly unexplored. What we do know is that there is quite an Isoptera presence that, last time I heard, is far from fully addressed. There might even be some ants or other hives, too."

"Does Sire wish for me to make contact with these hives and eradicate or place them under our control?" Vesperia asked nonchalantly.

"Not gonna lie, as long as they are addressed, I don't care how you do it," Jake shook his head. "But I would still be careful. They are underground, where I don't know how good your variant is at fighting, seeing as you're wasps and all. They also had a lot of time to grow, so they might have become quite powerful. Not to mention the fact that much of the underworld remains unexplored, and I don't know what other dangers might be waiting. As I said, much of it remains unexplored."

"Firstly, Sire, the Vespernat lineage does not struggle underground. Many of the offshoots from the Lineage are underground dwellers already, and we are more than adapted to that kind of environment. Perhaps not as much as other True Royal Lineages of the Endless Empire, such as the True Royal Lineage ruling the Isoptera line, but in the end, they are only Isoptera. My goal will also not be to fight them. Simply to announce my presence and allow them the honor of swearing fealty."

Jake furrowed his brows. "Are you sure they will be that receptive? What if they choose to fight back?"

Vesperia looked at Jake with a perplexed expression. "Why would they ever fight against the honor of submitting to a True Royal? One who even acts with the blessing of their True Royal ancestors? Even if I asked the Hive Queens to all kill themselves, it would be the greatest moment in their lives, simply for having the privilege of carrying out a direct order from me."

... had Jake ever mentioned that True Royals Hive Queens are mega scary?

## Chapter 922: The Fine Line Between Cute & Terrifying

Jake knew that the logic of ectognamorphs was something he truly couldn't understand. Vesperia also looked at him as if what she had said was only natural... which in her world it was. He had already known

that the Endless Empire was the most hierarchical organization in the entire multiverse, putting even demons to shame, but still.

Throughout the multiverse, power was the ultimate decider of status. Jake was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, yes, but he also knew that not a single god in existence viewed themselves as beneath him. Them being nice to him was either a display of respect toward the Malefic Viper, or because they found him interesting for his future potential. None of them would ever agree to be his subordinate and swear loyalty to Jake as a person, as he was ultimately just a mortal who was beneath their statute.

For Vesperia, it was different.

During the following conversation, where Jake asked some more things about how sure she was things would work out fine if she approached a bunch of other Hive Queens on Earth, and Vesperia explained a bit about her time at the Endless Empire,

She told him that during her time there, many variants of the Vespernat Lineage had made their way back to the Endless Empire. They had been independent factions before, operating by themselves with only a friendly relationship with the Empire, but when they heard – and felt – that a new Vespernat True Royal had appeared and resided at the Endless Empire Heartlands, they made their way there.

This included Hive Queen gods. Even a few at or around the realm of Godqueen – powerful beings with much renown in the multiverse in their own right – hurried there. Not just to see Vesperia but to recognize her and swear their loyalty without even knowing anything about her. It was also merely an implicit understanding that they were now part of the Endless Empire, ruled by Vesperia and Vesperia alone.

Despite how much weaker she was, they recognized her as their unquestionable leader. It was simply blind, biological devotion and loyalty, with no thought for rhyme, reason, or logic. They were just compelled by their nature. And while Jake had a good grasp of following his instincts... he did find the entire concept tough to fully grasp.

“I... to clarify, if you told a bunch of gods from your Lineage to go kill someone...?” Jake asked, just to clarify, after Vesperia was done with her explanation.

“Hm, I reckon they would ask the reason and offer me advice if it’s a good idea or not to carry out the order,” Vesperia answered without much thought. “Of course, that assumes it’s someone that’s controversial to kill.”

“And if you insisted, no matter the person?” Jake continued pressing.

“They’d naturally carry out their duty.”

“What if the other True Royals of the Endless Empire disagree?” Jake tried again.

“In that case, I would certainly consider the matter carefully,” Vesperia said, thinking a bit more about that one. “But I find the probability of that happening low. My desire to want someone dead badly enough to even disagree with the other Hive Queens beneath me will more likely than not be a desire born of the greater good of the Endless Empire, and my sisters would never disagree with something like that. However, let’s say that I want to do something everyone disagrees with. Just know that, no matter what, they do not have the authority or right to command me, even if I respect their opinions immensely.”

“What if Jake asks you to do something and the other True Royals oppose?” Sandy decided to also ask a hypothetical that Jake wasn’t sure he really wanted the answer to.

“That... would be problematic,” Vesperia answered with a frown. “I guess at that point, I would have to understand both sides and the essence of the disagreement and then simply decide for myself what I believe is best.”

Alright, that was a very balanced and reasonable response.

“To clarify, I am not going to be causing trouble,” Jake said. At least he wouldn’t cause any problems on purpose.

“Sure, sure, but what if the Endless Empires decide to make you an enemy for some reason?” Sandy continued to try pushing their hypothetical scenario.

“That wouldn’t happen,” Vesperia simply shook her head. “The Endless Empire does not declare enemies that easily, and if only one of the True Royals part of the council disagrees, it won’t happen.”

“So there you have it, no reason to fret over something that won’t happen,” Jake said, closing the subject.

“Fine...” Sandy said, sad they couldn’t cause trouble anymore. “Well, this has been fun, but I’m going to go and say hi to that scientist guy again and see if he has procured anything tasty since last time. He promised me more snacks if I visited again.”

“Sounds fun, enjoy yourself,” Jake waved the big worm off as Sandy took to the air and headed toward Arnold to do who-knows-what, leaving Vesperia and Jake behind in the valley.

“Sandy sure is a peculiar creature,” Vesperia commented once the big worm was gone. “I looked through the library of the Endless Empire and even consulted my sisters, and there were no traces of knowledge about their race anywhere. Then again, neither could I find anything regarding Sylphian Hawks. Don’t get me wrong, my hope was to perhaps find something to help assist them in their future growth, but... nothing.”

“The Malefic Viper also doesn’t seem to know much, if anything,” Jake shrugged. “Not that it matters, does it? I doubt they need much help to progress or to be told some historical facts about what’s best to do. They just need to follow their own instincts, and I believe they can go far. The same is true for you. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Vesperia smiled at his words. “Perhaps you’re right. Simply following my instincts without considerable forethought just seems foreign, yet also familiar. As if it clashes with my inherited memories.”

“Well, you aren’t just a normal True Royal, if there even is such a thing.”

“You’re right... I am also one of Sire’s creations,” she nodded in agreement.

Jake still wasn’t super keen on someone calling themselves his creation, but he just nodded nevertheless as he cracked a joke. “You’re not just a Vesperia... you’re also a Vespy.”

She smiled and lowered her head a bit as Jake got the hint and placed a hand on top of it. Having seen what she was capable of – and what kind of forces she commanded - he was already looking forward to what kind of chaos Vesperia could cause on Earth.

“Would it be fine if I call Miranda over? If you wanna help with the Prima Guardian defense, it would be best to keep her in the loop, and I’m sure she has some good information to get you started,” Jake asked Vesperia.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

“If you deem that the best course of action,” Vesperia agreed with a nod.

“I do, for sure,” Jake said as he pulled out a one-way communication token and quickly infused a message. “Besides, if I don’t keep her in the loop, I’m gonna get quite the scolding later. I can already imagine Miranda sending some poor party into a hive, only to find it already overrun with wasps, causing panic for the poor wayward adventures. Better to work together.”

“I’m still not entirely sure what this Miranda woman is to you. Is she not serving you?” Vesperia asked with some genuine confusion. “How could she dare scold her master?”

“She works for me,” Jake clarified. “No, I guess it’s more accurate to say we work together. I help her, she helps me, it’s all about mutual benefits. I also trust her, and she’s good at her job. But if she wishes to one day leave, I won’t do anything about it either. The same is true if she one day falls too far behind or fails to live up to expectations, at which point she will be fired. I don’t hope that happens, but it’s a possibility.”

“You humans have such odd relationships,” Vesperia sighed. “Truly difficult to understand.”

“Maybe,” Jake shrugged as he would argue it was ectognamorphs who had weird as fuck relationships, even if they were a lot simpler on paper.

Waiting for Miranda, they sat and talked a bit more on a bench in front of the pond as he continued to pat Vespy. It didn’t take long before Jake detected the resident witch, who’d quickly made her way over. Jake couldn’t blame her either... a True Royal visit had to be considered a major thing, right?

He just hoped Miranda and Vesperia could get along. If not, things would get awkward.

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Miranda was already stressed enough with all of the factions who would soon arrive on the planet. Making sure that fights wouldn't break out was a damn struggle, and there was also still all of the usual existing problems. Earth had truly become a melting pot, and melting pots always had their own unique challenges.

But, she had believed things were getting under control. Everything was finally calming down a bit... and then she got word that Sandy had returned to Earth. That in itself was fine, as the giant space worm didn't really cause much trouble on their own. There were a few annoyances from people wanting to meet Sandy, such as representatives from the United Tribes, but nothing the Chosen of the Lord Protector couldn't deal with on their own.

However, the passenger Sandy brought along wasn't someone Miranda could take lightly. Not in the slightest. True Royal was truly a deserved title, as they represented the peak of the Endless Empire – a pinnacle faction of the multiverse.

What's more, the power a True Royal wielded was of an entirely different nature to people who simply had a high status. Jake was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, yes, but he was still "only" a C-grade for now, and he wouldn't be able to command the forces of the Order of the Malefic Viper unless the god agreed and gave him express permission.

A True Royal needed no permission. All on her own, she was that peak figure who could command even gods to do her bidding. The ectognamorphs were the only race Miranda was aware of, where the deciding factor in the hierarchy wasn't power but the status of one's caste. What's more, this power in the hierarchy wasn't just some agreed-upon social construct but a tangible biological component of their races. It was simply the nature of every single ectognamorph to follow the command of their True Royal – their queen of Hive Queens.

And now one of those True Royals was on Earth. A thought that was far from comforting. It wasn't just that she was a powerful being in her own right, but that Miranda was legitimately afraid of the consequences if something should happen to her.

No, look on the bright side, she could also prove very useful, Miranda tried to tell herself, as she was finally contacted by Jake to go meet this True Royal. It was honestly a huge relief he contacted her, as she had honestly put it down to a fifty-fifty if Jake would keep her in the loop about what he and the True Royal were planning. Good to see they didn't have another Eternal Hunger on their hands from him unleashing a True Royal on Earth haphazardly.

Arriving in the forest part of Haven, she hurried to the lodge. She could already feel the presence of the True Royal there, and she made sure to calm herself down fully before having her meeting with a being that truly deserved to be called royalty of the multiverse.

While she had briefly met the True Royal prior, this would effectively be their first real meeting, and she wanted to make a good impression. It was also undoubtful that this kind of encounter was impactful on her progress as a Court Witch.

Walking into the valley, she turned a corner before finally laying her eyes on Jake and the True Royal sitting on a bench in front of the small pond. Miranda had a lot of thoughts beforehand and felt quite nervous, but...

What she saw was a True Royal, capable of commanding armies that could destroy galaxies with ease, sitting with eyes closed as Jake ruffled her hair. What's more, she didn't lean away or object but leaned further into the hand as if she were a cat getting petted.

Kinda cute... Miranda thought before catching herself and clearing her throat.

The True Royal instantly sat up straight, while Jake had clearly already been aware she was there. Miranda chose to act as if she hadn't seen anything weird as she bowed slightly. "I greet Her Majesty of the Vespernat Lineage."

Seeing her stand up, Miranda only now saw how damn tall the True Royal was as she also greeted Miranda. "It's a pleasure to meet the Court Witch of the Verdant Lagoon. I have heard good things from my Sire about your abilities."

Their tones were formal, but the words of the True Royal made it very clear she viewed Miranda as someone of clearly lower status than herself. That wasn't something that really bothered Miranda, as

she also knew the only reason a True Royal even bothered being on Earth and was willing to help them was because of Jake.

"I do not wish to waste your time, so let me get straight to the point: I have been informed Her Majesty is willing to assist us with handling ectognamorphs on Earth and address them before they become potential issues during the Prima Guardian event?" Miranda asked clarifyingly, including what Jake sent in his brief message.

"That is so," the True Royal simply confirmed. "I was told you had some information that would make this task easier for me. Also, it would be best to ensure I do not interfere with your ongoing operations, especially the operations of the Void-Touched Mechanic."

"Naturally," Miranda nodded, agreeing having her and Arnold clash wouldn't be a good idea. "I have brought along a map and an overview of where we are currently focusing. May I ask how Her Majesty plans on approaching the task of spreading the knowledge of her presence?"

"I will send drones with my pheromones across the planet and into any hive they detect," the Vespernat Hive Queen said casually as she received the items Miranda had brought along, containing all the information she would need. "After a brief discussion with my Sire just before your arrival, we agreed that I shall not exterminate or make them surrender to us outright but merely order them not to take part in the upcoming event in any way. That way, you can continue using them as nourishment even after the event concludes."

"A good strategy to keep them around," Miranda nodded. In truth, she wasn't really worried about the ectognamorph hives on Earth. They were more hunting spots than real dangers, as Earth was more than fully capable of handling them. Having the True Royal make sure they wouldn't interfere during the Prima Guardian event would definitely be nice, though.

"Naturally. It was one Sire proposed," the True Royal said, Miranda having to fight really hard not to comment that Jake's ideas weren't usually in the camp of being "good."

"Just to jump in, we did also discuss having some of her drones help map out the underground while employing the hives she encounters to help," Jake joined the conversation.



"I see," Miranda said. "Definitely coordinate with Arnold on that front, as he has also been working on mapping out the underground in the area beneath human-controlled lands."

"Got it," Jake nodded as he turned to the True Royal. "I assume you can discuss with Arnold alone?"

"I will do so," she nodded, her tone very different when she talked with Jake compared to Miranda.

"Goodie," Jake nodded. "I also just had a thought... can you leave one of your Queen's Guards here for a bit? I want some of its venom. For science."

"Of course," the True Royal instantly agreed to what, according to all the etiquette books when dealing with a True Royal Miranda had read, was a giant no-no.

"Great," Jake smiled brightly as he patted the True Royal on the head. "Thanks Vespy."

Rather than be insulted at the pat and nickname, the True Royal simply smiled and lowered her head as Miranda once more had intrusive thoughts about the Hive Queen being quite adorable.

Miranda also couldn't help but think...True Royals were terrifying, yes. But if they were considered terrifying, then what the hell would you call the guy who was casually patting one on the head while calling her a cute nickname?

## Chapter 923: Politics Still Suck

Miranda stayed a bit longer, discussing stuff with Vesperia, as Jake tried not to get in the way. He did feel like the two weren't being very friendly but overly professional. It wasn't ideal, but better than them being assholes to one another, for sure.

After Miranda left, Jake had half-expected Vesperia to do the same. However, she made no attempts to but stuck around even as Jake planned on heading to his lab to do some alchemy with one of her Queen's Guards. She seemed to notice his confusion and quickly clarified:

"I see no reason to go out myself, but will instead only send my drones to do the job. No purpose in me taking any risks for myself, and my sisters were also very adamant about being as safe as possible while here on Earth. And the safest place is by your side."

"So you're staying here?" Jake asked.

"Can I not?" Vesperia asked, looking at him with big eyes.

"Of course you can; I was just surprised," Jake quickly wanted to make clear. "I just think it will be boring for you, as I plan on doing alchemy all the time."

"It's fine; I shall attend to my own matters, too," Vesperia said with a smile. "I have much to attend to within my Internal Hive. It will slow down things a bit that I have one less Hive Queen to assist me with Sandy having taken one, but one should be enough to continue to facilitate my growth."

"That actually got me thinking... how do the Hive Queens help in the internal world? I thought you said they can't spawn anything in there?"

"They cannot... but they can help spawn the eggs I make. Making eggs does not consume that much Hive Energy on its own; it's only as they grow and hatch the true cost comes. I can have other Hive Queens share some of this cost in Hive Energy with me, effectively making spawns cheaper for me, at the cost of reserving some of their Hive Energy on my behalf," Vesperia explained. "Queens who do this a lot often end up taking one of two Paths. One Path is to become a fully support-type Hive Queen that never aims to make its own hive but only assists the true Hive Queen of the Hive. The second is to become Warrior Hive Queens, focusing all their time on improving their combat skills, as the majority of their Hive Energy remains constantly reserved anyway, making it not worth it for them to focus on creating their own spawns. Ah, but some Warrior Queens also simply never focused on making any spawns in the first place, and they can even lose their ability to do so with evolutions."

"I see," Jake nodded, getting a far more detailed and longer answer than he expected. Also, by now, he was wondering how many huge internal secrets of the Endless Empire Vesperia had shared with him so far. Probably a lot, right?

"Well, if you're gonna stick around, how about a quick lab tour?" Jake said with a smile, Vesperia gladly agreeing as the two of them headed down to the laboratory beneath the lodge.

Granted, things did seem a bit cramped in places, as Hank had constructed it with human height in mind, but Vesperia managed nonetheless as Jake showed off the place. He did wonder if she was incapable of shrinking herself in any way, but didn't ask outright as that seemed rude in case she couldn't. Actually, if she could, she definitely would have by now, seeing as how she nearly hit her head on every single doorframe.

Once the tour was over, they ended up in the alchemy lab. Due to the alchemy lab itself being inside a giant bubble of glass, Vesperia couldn't really enter it while Jake did his alchemy, as breathing in toxic fumes wasn't healthy unless you had *Palate of the Malefic Viper*.

Luckily, there was a bedroom right next door where Vesperia could set up shop. Unluckily, she had to bend her head a bit to not touch the ceiling. Back to being lucky again, that wasn't really a problem as Vesperia didn't plan on actually being in the room much.

Summoning the portal to her internal world, Jake's first thought was that something would break if one of her large spawns tried to walk out of it. However, she didn't plan on bringing anything out. Instead, she would go in.

Now, Jake had very much assumed her way of entering her internal world would be through meditation and having an avatar or something in there. Not to physically walk through a portal with her real body, which just left so many questions.

Seeing as she was the source of the portal, wasn't it like bringing a portal into a portal? Kind of? Secondly, what would happen if someone broke the portal while she was inside? Thirdly, wasn't having a portal constantly active like this incredibly risky? Like, what if someone decided to toss dangerous shit in there while she couldn't sense the outside world? True, no living being could enter, but Jake confirmed that he could pump in toxic mist if he so desired.

Also, while living beings couldn't enter, that didn't mean they couldn't try. Trying would usually result in a rejection, but should they be powerful enough and press hard, they could collapse the portal, which brought Jake back to the second problem.

He couldn't help but voice his concerns at what may be a fatal flaw of how the Internal Hives of the True Royals worked... but in retrospect, he should probably have known they had long either addressed these kinds of things, or it wasn't really a problem.

“Firstly, while I cannot see outside the portal, it’s pretty standard to leave some scouts outside to ensure nothing unforeseen approaches. More often than not, I wouldn’t even wait for someone to try and enter the portal or throw anything into it but simply collapse it upon noticing their approach. Now, this is a bit annoying, as that leaves me trapped in my Internal Hive, but I can always open up a portal in the same place I collapsed one... and if all else fails, I can simply have one of my sisters come fetch me and help me out,” Vesperia explained.

Still, Jake still saw an issue there.

“What if it happens in the ninety-third universe, though?” Jake questioned. “Will you just be trapped until the universe opens up who-knows-when?”

“No?” Vesperia said, looking perplexed. “My Internal Hive isn’t located in the ninety-third universe.”

“... when you say it isn’t located here in this universe, do you mean it has an actual physical location that one can go to?” Jake asked, very confused. As he understood it, something like an Internal Hive had to effectively exist within the soul of someone, right? At least, that’s how he knew it worked with Sandy and others who had “internal spaces.” Even Jake’s Palate, which could house physical items, was inside his soul.

“Yes?” Vesperia kept looking confused. “The Internal Hive is located adjacent to the Hidden World from which True Royals once entered the multiverse – our deepest heartlands. It exists physically within the void, outside of any universe, and it wouldn’t be inaccurate to refer to it as a pseudo-nascent divine realm, at least in its function. To make it clear, my Internal Hive is by no means standard, but one I have obtained due to inheritance owed to me on account of my Lineage.”

“That... huh,” Jake muttered. “Doesn’t that mean it’s a sure-fire escape method to just enter your Internal Hive, collapse the portal, and hide there while waiting for help?”

“No, it’s incredibly risky,” Vesperia shook her head. “I said it’s adjacent to the Hidden World, but distances in the void aren’t truly a concept. No one knows where the Internal Hive is located... but with a collapsed portal, they can track my location, as I lose the system’s effects that help hide it when the portal is active and I’m inside. Seeing as the Internal Hive is located in the void, my enemies will be able to attack me once they know the location. This is how many True Royals have fallen to the Automata throughout the eras. In many ways, it can be compared to how gods try to keep the location of their divine realms within the void hidden.”

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Jake just nodded along, feeling like he learned a lot. Probably a lot of stuff he shouldn't have, and things that were definitely considered confidential... something that was confirmed a moment later as he heard the voice of the Malefic Viper.

"I'm sure also learning a lot about True Royals today... or at the very least getting quite a few theories confirmed," the god said, sounding quite pleased with himself. This prompted Jake to quickly raise a hand as Vesperia looked about to speak again.

"Hey, I just wanna warn you, the Malefic Viper is listening in to every damn thing you're saying... so probably keep all the secrets of the Endless Empire under wraps a bit," Jake said with concern.

Vesperia just smiled at his warning. "I am fully aware and do not worry. It has been agreed that I can provide both you and the Malefic Viper every piece of information I have volunteered thus far. The Endless Empire views you as a close ally and as if you are part of my Hive. Almost like an honorary member of the True Royals, if you will. Seeing as the Malefic One is your Patron, we also view him, at the very least, as someone we wish to foster positive relations to, and thus will show goodwill towards."

"And people say you can't do politics... now look at you, fostering powerful diplomatic ties between the Order and the Endless Empire," Villy teased Jake.

"You are one of the primary people who call me bad at politics,"

Jake shot back.

"Accidentally being good at it once in a while doesn't make you a professional. At most, you are professionally good at being accidentally proficient in politics," the Viper teased Jake, who chose to ignore the damn snake god and focused on Vesperia instead.

"I guess I can only thank you and the Endless Empire for the trust. From both me and the Viper," Jake said with a smile.

“It’s only natural. You’re my Sire, after all,” Vesperia said, clearly not viewing her show of trust as a big deal. Likely because it wasn’t to her.

After a bit more small talk, Vesperia entered her Internal Hive while Jake went into his alchemy lab. His plan was still to work on the Heartrot Poison, but now he had added a bit of stabby-time with wasp venom to feed his Palate.

His alchemy session began, and he was only slightly disturbed when Vesperia went topside and unleashed her army a few days later before going back underground again. She did this a few times, sending her drones in different directions while also using Jake’s phone to sometimes talk to Miranda.

Whenever Jake and Vesperia did talk, it was mainly about getting him some wasp venom. Through the grapevine, Jake did hear a bit about what was going on with Earth, but he focused the vast majority of his attention on doing alchemy.

Weeks turned to months, and things were busy on the planet for sure. Vesperia’s drones swarmed across Earth, spreading her message to all the hives. What’s more, according to her, many of the bigger hives were in contact, and the order of the True Royal would definitely be known to all ectognamorph on the planet before the Prima Guardian arrived. So that was one potential source of trouble dealt with.

Hearing how Vesperia and others helped did make Jake feel a bit guilty about just doing alchemy, but he tried his best to stay focused and with his one-track mind, did a pretty good job.

Even when people started to arrive on the planet, Jake didn’t go out to meet them. It simply wasn’t needed, and Miranda even told him that Jake staying away made Earth look stronger. Jake wasn’t sure if she meant stronger as in actual power or more that Earth’s position appeared stronger when they didn’t even feel the need to bring out the true leader of the planet. As if telling the arriving groups that they were ultimately only guests, and at a lower position, unable to make any demands.

Now, Jake did want to go say hi when Casper and the Risen arrived, but Miranda once more informed him not to, with Vesperia in vehement agreement. She also explained things to Jake, making it clear that the entire “stronger” discussion before was definitely about political stuff. Jake really hated political stuff... especially when Vesperia made it clear politics were to blame for Jake not going to meet his old buddy.

“You view it as your friend visiting, and if he had arrived alone or with only a couple of people, you could have gone. However, he is not here as your friend but as an envoy and diplomat of the Risen. He is here in an official capacity, and before treating him like the individual who is your friend, you must treat him according to the whole he embodies. Anything else could cause misunderstandings, especially as the Risen are far from a popular race, and your showing favoritism toward them will cause dissatisfaction for some. Especially seeing as I doubt you plan to show the same welcoming mood toward the Holy Church, a far more popular faction in the multiverse. Remember, even if they do not have any official position on the planet, many still view them as a positive force in the multiverse, and they do still have some believers around, too. Worst case scenario, your actions may even lead to speculation that in the conflict between the Risen and the Holy Church, you side with the Risen.”

“In my defense, I do like the Risen more than the Holy Church...” Jake muttered, making Vesperia shake her head.

“Better to keep such emotions hidden until you can truly act upon them. Neutrality is a powerful weapon and defense, and right now, you have a powerful position as this planet’s World Leader. You are capable of keeping everyone in check because they all fear being the ones to make you break your neutral stance and act against them, so as long as you remain impartial – at least on the surface – you also remain fully in control,” Vesperia continued to explain.

“You know, for someone who has a hard time understanding human relationships, you are very good at human politics,” Jake said with a sigh.

“The Endless Empire is a mostly neutral faction, so having some basic understanding of politics is a given. Sure, we do act in our own interest, and we do not fear making enemies, but there needs to be something to be gained. Right now, I do not see the benefits of making any factions your enemies or even to make them view you less favorably,” Vesperia continued.

Jake wasn’t going to comment on the absurdity of a wasp that was only a few years old teaching about politics, and at this point, he did have to admit that a lot of it was willful ignorance. All of the pussy-footing and political bullshit was just too opposed to his Path, where simplicity was at the center. Still... best to just listen to the people who know how to politic. Even if politics still suck, but that was implicit.

“So, to sum it up... it’s best I remain all haughty and arrogant, staying as the high and mighty World Leader who refuses to even entertain interacting with anyone visiting before absolutely necessary?” Jake wanted to clarify with Vesperia, who had obviously also talked this all over with Miranda.

“You will show yourself before them soon,” Vesperia said with a smile. “You should have received the system invitation already, haven’t you?”

“I have? To what?” Jake asked, confused, as he quickly pulled up his notifications. Firstly, he had to skip past the four levels he had gained over the last quite a few months – a huge reason for which was definitely the tasty wasp venom he had consumed through repeated stabbings. These notifications also included the period before Vesperia arrived, so it had actually been quite a few months.

‘DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 272 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

‘DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 275 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 281 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 282 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

After skipping a few more, he finally found the one Vesperia had been talking about as he wondered how the hell he had missed it:

Announcement to all eligible nobles and special invitees on Earth: A World Congress has been scheduled, set to start in: 14 days & 11:17:54.

You must be within the territory of a Pylon of Civilization and have permission to enter from the City Lord or ruler of the Pylon.

“Oh yeah... Miranda did talk about calling a World Congress before the event started,” Jake muttered. “I guess I’m expected to attend this?”

“Of course,” Vesperia giggled a bit. “In fact, it will be the one thing you will attend, as it will allow you to meet all factions at the same time in a setting where it’s clear you have a superior position.”



“And I’ll be right next to Miranda so she can coach me,” Jake pointed out as a thought struck him. “Wait, will you also be there?”

“Naturally,” Vesperia smiled.

Jake had to hold back a sigh as he could already imagine this little World Congress being quite... something.

Oh well, Jake saw no reason to fret about it. He returned to his alchemy as two weeks quickly passed, and it was soon time for the fourth World Congress of Earth: Prima Guardian Strategy Meeting Edition.

Chapter 924: Someone Just Had To

“So, you’re clear on your role, right?” Miranda asked Jake who had three women stare him down with expectant looks.

“Keep quiet and look menacing?” Jake asked a bit nervously. “At least for the most part...”

“You can speak up; just do so with forethought,” Vesperia added.

“I would recommend you to only speak up if you deem it absolutely necessary,” Miranda kind of disagreed. “Outside of your small opening speech, of course.”

“Do I really need to do a speech? Can’t you just do it?” Jake tried to worm his way out of it.

“No, as the World Leader, it needs to be you. Plus, it allows you to avoid actively participating in the following discussions if you don’t want to, as you’ve already made your position in the matter clear right from the get-go. Finally, we should at least show a basic level of courtesy by you directly addressing our visitors and all the leaders who are taking part in this World Congress,” Miranda continued to explain.

“There’s no need to worry; just memorize the speech as best as you can. Or, at the very least, the spirit and central message of it. You can make the words and the delivery your own,” Lillian also chimed in.

“Adding some personality would be best,” Vesperia agreed with a nod. “And allow them all to bask in your aura meanwhile. Do not actively push it to suppress them, but don’t restrain it either. Let them know you are indeed the most dangerous being in the room, and make it clear that declaring you an enemy is not in their interest.”

“Indeed,” Miranda concurred too. “While the chances of individuals wishing you, I, or any of the other leaders of Earth harm are low, and we have yet to catch anyone with such thoughts, it’s still better to be safe than sorry. If you let your aura remain unconstrained, perhaps it can even help sniff out a few of those who are still dissatisfied with you. Make mental notes of these people.”

Jake slowly nodded as he tried to remember everything, as he looked at the paper on the table with the speech written on it. At the bottom, they had even included all the key points he had to go over in a concise fashion.

This meeting in Jake’s lodge was the final preparations for the World Congress, where the three women wanted to coach Jake and make sure he was ready. While this was definitely way lower stakes than stuff such as the Chosen Ceremony, Miranda still took it very seriously, and Vesperia definitely added a layer of complexity as she would also be participating. This would be her first time openly showing herself to the leaders of Earth, and first impressions were always important.

There were some potential issues they had gone over but didn’t really have the ability to prepare or safeguard against. The biggest one was who would take part in this meeting, more importantly, how damn different those participating would be, and what kind of conflicts that could give rise to.

To summarize, there would be a Unique Lifeform leading a group of monsters, vampires from the Noboru Clan, the Sky Whale representing a horde of beasts, Casper and the Risen, Jacob and the Holy Church, assassins from the Court of Shadows, Valhal, Jake himself, Arthur and “normal” humans who were still struggling with adapting to the system, former slaves of different races... and now they even had a True Royal ectognamorph in there, another very unpopular race.

It was, to put it nicely, a clusterfuck of factions where a good chunk of them were openly in conflict, with a few very unpopular races mixed in just for good measure. It felt almost inevitable that something would happen, but they hoped to suppress anyone daring to cause a scene by Jake being a scary guy, making it clear he would come down on anyone who acted like trouble-makers.

Quite the responsibility, but Jake would just have to deal with it.

"I believe that's everything we meant to cover," Lillian said after a brief pause. "Do also remember that the format of this World Congress is a bit different than usual."

"True, I forgot to mention that," Miranda nodded. "It was good you gave me permission to schedule and plan the congress. There are quite a few options for customization, and it took longer than I anticipated, especially sorting out who to invite and issuing these invites to all those who arrived on the planet after the event was planned. Not to mention planning the actual congress and its setup."

Jake could only agree as he kept checking his paper with the speech on. They discussed a few more minor things before finally, the event arrived. Jake received his invite and quickly accepted it as he felt himself being moved elsewhere. This wasn't just moving his soul either, but his entire physical body was teleported to the recognizable World Congress hall.

Things had changed since the last time Jake was there, though. Before, he always assumed it was in some weird system-created space that didn't really exist anywhere, but now he knew... they were deep beneath the ground. As deep as one could possibly get, as Jake was confident:

This space existed within the Planetary Pylon.

He didn't really have time to share this discovery as he stood on the usual platform, though it had been raised to an even higher position than before, making him stand the furthest up by far. Alongside him, Miranda, Lillian, Vesperia, Arnold, Holstred, and two more people Jake didn't really know appeared.

Across the hall, others also began to arrive, as Jake spotted all the expected participants. He didn't know how often this many in-conflict factions and races could be gathered in one space like this, but this had to be a pretty damn rare sight, right?

Jake also saw that the Fallen King appeared on his right while the Sword Saint popped in on his left. He saw that a familiar face had joined him as Reika stood by her great-grandfather's side, along with quite a few vampires. Bringing several vampires had definitely been a conscious choice to "show them off," so to say.

The Sky Whale in his human form also made his appearance, standing next to the Fallen King, with even Sylphie having decided to join him. This was another difference between the purely system-created World Congresses and the one Miranda made herself... the invited members were no longer limited to

those with nobility titles or humanoids. She could invite anyone she wanted, which she clearly had, as many beasts and monsters of different sorts appeared in their humanoid form.

Arthur also appeared just one step further to the left of Jake, standing next to the Sword Saint. On another elevated position, Caleb and the Court of Shadows teleported in, showing they were also considered of high status. Now, Valhal wouldn't get one of these elevated podiums, as they were still – at least officially – not on super good terms with Earth's leadership after the Ell'Hakan debacle.

However, they were placed right next to the elevated platforms, proving they were at least halfway out of the doghouse. At least, that's how Miranda had explained it... because, yes, the placement of every single faction had been a huge consideration. This was yet another reason why it was good Miranda had handled everything regarding this event because Jake would have just auto-sorted and told the system to place them alphabetically or some shit like that.

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After about a minute, everyone had arrived, and a system message appeared.

Welcome to the World Congress of Earth: Prima Guardian Preparation Strategy Meeting.

This World Congress is scheduled to discuss Earth's approach to the Prima Guardian event. There will be no votes during this World Congress, but it shall solely serve as a strategy meeting for the upcoming event and for all participating forces to get acquainted. All privacy functions of the booths have been disabled to foster proper cooperation.

Violence is not allowed during the World Congress. The purpose of this World Congress is discussion, and outright hostile actions or threats are not permitted. While in this space and on the planet as a whole, everyone is expected to act according to the laws of Earth.

This message wasn't actually written by the system but by Miranda and Lillian. It did seem like they had made it quite a lot shorter compared to some of the initial drafts Jake had heard about, but it definitely got the job done and set the stage with how it finished by telling everyone to act nicely.

Jake gave everyone a bit to read this message, as sadly, he was the one supposed to initiate this World Congress. Taking a breath, Jake remembered the main parts of the speech and spoke as he infused his voice with mana and let his unconstrained aura spread.

“Allow me to echo the message earlier and welcome you all to this extraordinary World Congress. I see quite a few familiar faces, some old, some new. Some who’ve acted against my own and Earth’s interests before, and some who’ve always remained allies. Know that this is not a time for grudges, and we are all here to work together for the upcoming event. Not work against one another... and if I can shelve my grudges for now, so can you,” Jake began his speech, definitely going off-script in a few minor places, but based on how Miranda, Lillian, and Vesperia looked pleased enough, he kept going.

“With that spirit, let me also clarify to all those who recently arrived: even if we are allies, at least for now, you are still guests. Act like it. This is not your home turf, even if you originated from Earth, and your factions have no power here. This planet – my planet – welcomes all who can stick to the rules, no matter their race or Path. Be they human, Unique Lifeform, Risen, vampire, beast, elemental... or even a True Royal from the Endless Empire.”

Vesperia took the cue and nodded her head to the crowd as if announcing herself, though it wasn’t really necessary. She had a unique aura around her already, and it wasn’t like her identity or appearance were a secret. During the Chosen Ceremony, she had openly shown herself, and it was only to be expected many of the factions present had received intelligence about her existence. Plenty of people had already been gawking.

Still, they were definitely surprised she was on Earth. He didn’t doubt many telepathic messages were flying at this very moment, but Jake paid it no heed as he continued speaking.

“We are all here to benefit from the Prima Guardian event, nothing more, nothing less. So, let the ideologies of your faction lie for now and work together as we seek to hunt down this Prima Guardian. Because if you don’t cooperate with our efforts, you work against us... and at that point, you shall share the same fate as the Prima Guardian. Yes, that is a threat, and don’t think, for a single second, that any faction will afford you even a moment of mercy.”

Alright, he had definitely gone a little bit off-script there, and Miranda did throw him a subtle glance as Jake decided to finish up.

“But it won’t ever come to that, now will it? Let us all hope not,” Jake said, softening the blow of the threat a little bit. “Today, our purpose is to plan out our approach to the event itself and for you to offer

whatever insight your factions may have, including any speculations that are worth sharing. Hold nothing back, for we will not. Our goal for this Prima Guardian event is not merely to beat it but to do so as flawlessly as possible. Something that will surely prove mutually beneficial for all who are here, so let's all cooperate to ensure the ideal outcome and reap the rewards in unison."

His speech wasn't long, but he got the important points across while even throwing in some good subtle – and not-so-subtle – threats. He had wondered why Miranda couldn't just have said all the things he just did, but she assured him it was best Jake was the one. That way, the words would carry more weight... and they had cause if he acted upon them later.

Either way, the essence of the entire speech had been to clarify everyone was expected to work together, and that he didn't care for whatever grudges they had. That everyone is welcome on Earth, no matter who or what they are.

"As Lord Thayne said, the goal is for us all to work together as cohesively and effectively as possible," Miranda finally jumped in, not infusing her voice with any energy, as she already spoke more than loudly enough. All the attention also definitely remained on their platform, helped by Jake not reigning in his aura at all. Instead, he just let it hang there for them all to get used to it while putting a bit of pressure on everyone to act nice.

"I don't believe I have to introduce anyone here, so let me just get started and not drag this out more than necessary," Miranda began as she summoned a huge projection in the middle of the circular conference hall, showing the entire planet. "Let us begin with the current state of preparations that have already been made..."

The next part was painful for Jake to sit through. Not only was it all information Jake had already heard before, but he even had to deal with people asking questions for clarification throughout, as Miranda did a long presentation on Earth's current status.

After some time, the Sky Whale and Fallen King also joined, with Arthur jumping in as well. Jake threw a glance toward the Sky Whale's platform and found a sleeping green hawk on one of the chairs. He very much wanted to mimic her, but alas, he had to stand there menacingly.

Carmen, at the Valhal podium, also looked openly bored. Other people he knew who didn't seem overly interested in politics, such as Eron, had far more neutral expressions. The guy was always pretty impossible to read, honestly.

Now, Arnold, that dude knew what was up. He was wearing glasses, and while it was hard to see, they definitely had screens on the inside. Huge respect to him for reading or watching videos and stuff during an important meeting... really gave Jake flashbacks to work before the system.

Looking over at the other person at his old company who was the most likely to also watch videos on the internet during important work meetings, Casper managed to somehow not look bored. Perhaps he had been through a baptism of politics himself, being one of the top figures of the Risen, as he was definitely holding up well.

All in all, Jake would say things were going pretty well, even if he was bored as fuck, and soon, they were done getting everyone on the same page about where Earth was with their current Prima Guardian defense efforts. Vesperia and Arnold didn't talk, but Miranda did make their contributions clear, and no one seemed to be side-eyeing Vesperia much, which was a huge relief to Jake. He had been afraid several factions or humans on Earth would be very against her.

Then again, she did look very humanoid, so that was probably why most didn't have a problem.

Moving on with the meeting, the next topic was what the newcomers would be doing. Seeing as there was still a bit of time before the Prima Guardian arrived, they would definitely be put to work.

"Before we know exactly where on Earth the Prima Guardian will originate, we will designate different teams across the planet. Space mages have been working on means to quickly establish a teleportation circle so we can get everyone there quickly, but we still need powerful enough groups to handle the regular Primas that will come alongside the Guardian," Miranda explained, everything sounding reasonable to Jake so far.

But... just when the meeting was going so damn well, everything was ruined. While Miranda was briefly touching upon some of the current plans of who would go where someone just had to do it. And, of course, it had to be someone affiliated with the damn Holy Church. It wasn't someone who had arrived with Jacob and company, but one of the city leaders who had been left behind when they left, who used to belong to the Church and clearly still subscribed to the religion.

Perhaps he felt empowered from standing next to Jacob, or perhaps he was just an idiot... but he just had to go and do it:

“If you want anyone from my city to go anywhere near there, you need to get rid of those damn abominations first,” the man said, staring at the people – vampires - standing with the Sword Saint. “Having an enemy both in front of us and at our sides will certainly spell doom.”

Miranda had given the man the room to speak when he lifted his hand... but her eyes narrowed at what he said. That is when Jake spoke up.

“Read the rules. You get only one strike.”

The man looked perplexed at Jake and completely ignored Jacob, who was staring daggers at him. “I apologize, Lord Thayne...”

For a moment, Jake had hope.

“... but those abominations simply do not belong on-“

And just like that, he’d spoken his final words.

A brief glance, two glowing eyes, a single crumbled soul.

Everyone stood there, shocked, while the lifeless man fell forward, slamming into the ground with a thud as the whole room became silent enough to hear a pin – or, in this case, a corpse – drop.

#### Chapter 925: Vision, Phones, & End of World Congress

Jake had really, really, hoped he didn’t have to do that, but alas, it was part of his job. It was not just him making some impulsive decision to kill an asshole – though it would definitely not be out of character for him – but something Miranda and he had discussed long before the congress began. It was also something only he could do.

In a brief moment, the entire atmosphere of the room changed, as none dared say anything for several seconds, while most just stared at the now lifeless man on the ground.



Miranda purposefully let this atmosphere hang in the air for several moments. After what felt like an eternity to many of those present, she let out a loud sigh. "There always has to be one person who can't follow basic rules, huh? Would those who came with him be so kind as to remove the body? If not, we shall dispose of it for you."

One of those who was part of the dead man's entourage quickly moved and picked up the body before putting it in a spatial storage after he'd unfortunately died due to an overdose of overconfidence and stupidity. Jake's method of killing had at least left a pristine corpse, making an open-casket funeral more than possible. How kind of him.

"Now, before we proceed, I guess I should address the thoughts many of you are currently having. You question how we can kill someone in a World Congress where violence is meant to be forbidden. However, this doubt is rooted in a basic misunderstanding of how things work here on this planet," Miranda continued as she had all attention on her.

"You were all given a folder outlining the, quite frankly, very basic laws of Earth, but it appears some had not read the final clause," she continued as she spoke in a far more serious voice with the final part: "These rules do not apply to Lord Thayne, the World Leader. His actions and decisions supersede the law, and every action is justified. To have given the man a single warning for not being able to follow a few basic rules was already a kindness that wasn't warranted."

She definitely wasn't fucking around as she said this. Her explanation was also the reason why Jake had to be the one to do this. If Miranda or others acted outside the rules and laws, it would put the entire system into question. At that point, what even would be the meaning of laws if Jake could exempt some people willy-nilly?

No, if it was only Jake, that was easy to understand and, across the multiverse, a surprisingly normal thing. It was far from odd to see rulers be immune to laws, with their families often also included in this immunity. In fact, many monarchies before the system also had clauses that meant the direct royal family couldn't be punished according to the law... though in reality, they often would if they did commit a harsh enough crime.

All of this is to say is that Jake's action hadn't been out of pocket according to the logic of the multiverse, and Miranda had told him that should a situation like this arrive, he was free to act with impunity. It had all been a political move that helped make it very clear these factions were in someone else's territory now.

"Everyone seems to understand, I hope?" Miranda said with a smile. "Good. Now, let's continue unless there are any more interruptions or complaints?"

Surprisingly, there weren't. Almost as if instant death by someone looking angrily at you was a good deterrent.

"Moving on. Before the rude interruption, we were discussing where the Prima Guardian might appear, and discussing placements of groups to act as rapid-response teams. Based on the description of the event, the Prima Guardian will not act immediately, but we cannot be sure about the regular Primas or any other beasts or monsters fighting alongside them," Miranda continued. "We didn't quite get to it before, but does anyone have something to add or some information their faction has obtained about the event? Probable speculation is also welcome."

Jake hadn't really expected anyone to know much... and when he saw Jacob raise a hand to speak, Jake really hoped he wasn't going to complain about the man who had just been killed. It was clear Jake tended to be fine with killing, but he really didn't want to attack someone he still considered a friend... and while he and Jacob had definitely drifted apart in recent years, Jake still considered the Augur a friend.

Luckily, that wasn't what he wanted to say as he spoke after Miranda gave him the go-ahead.

"Thank you for the time. Let me begin by saying that the Holy Church truly doesn't know more than Ms. Wells has already shared, but personally, I may have gained some insight. What I'm about to say cannot really be confirmed by anyone but myself. However, I believe it's still vital to share nonetheless," Jacob began. "After returning to the planet, I have focused on divining anything I could regarding the upcoming event... and I finally had a vision just yesterday. Please, allow me to share it."

Instantly, quite a few people, Jake included, perked up with interest. Miranda also looked serious and nodded. Jacob closed his eyes for a moment as he continued.

"I saw a dark void filled with glowing crystals in the sky, barely giving any light. The ground is soft, shifting. I'm hot; the air is dry and nearly devoid of all life. Then, suddenly, the sky is alight. It burns as a grand shadow falls over me before something explodes, and a shockwave rushes over my face, ending the vision."

The room was silent, as Jake really hoped some smart people would interpret the vision. For a moment, Jake thought that Jacob talked about the moon when he mentioned it being devoid of life, but the moon wasn't soft and definitely not hot. Plus, it had to be on Earth, right...

A desert, maybe?

"This is the divination in its raw form, but allow me to share my interpretation," Jacob said. "The lights are stars, and the environment I feel makes me believe it's in an area close to the equator. Far from the oceans, as there is no moisture in the air. As for the shadow and the shockwave... I believe this Prima Guardian will arrive on some kind of meteorite or a celestial object that will crash onto Earth from space."

Jacob finished, getting quite a few murmurs from all around. Jake also subtly nodded, Jacob's interpretation seeming pretty spot on. The Prima Guardian arriving on a meteor or something also made a lot more sense than it just popping into existence somewhere.

As for not believing Jacob's vision or taking it with a grain of salt... well, there was a reason factions were keen on recruiting an Augur. There was no reason not to trust his divination, and it was honestly pretty good information.

"Do you think it's possible to narrow down exactly where it still strike down?" Miranda asked.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

"I can't make any promises, but I will do my best," Jacob answered in a humble tone. "My plans are to travel the planet a bit during this final preparation period and try to find a more exact location."

"Directly on the other side of the planet, there is a massive desert," Jake decided to speak, for the first time not infusing his voice with mana or trying to intimidate anyone. "From your description, that seems like a probable location."

"A desert would indeed match my vision," Jacob nodded. "For the system event to take place borderline as far away from where the enlightened live would also make sense from a system point of view... I shall make it the first place I investigate once the congress is over."

"Sounds like we can avoid much prep work if we can narrow down the location," Miranda smiled.

"Nevertheless, we should continue preparations with the assumption the exact touch-down spot of the Prima Guardian isn't found in time. With the vision, we can at least eliminate a lot of potential areas, such as all the oceans, large lakes, forests, and whatnot."

The mood in the room had changed rapidly, no longer as tense, after good news was shared. Jacob and the Holy Church had also quickly "redeemed" themselves after that moron had gotten himself killed, as no one dwelled on the matter anymore.

For the rest of the World Congress, people remained polite and well-mannered. A few discussions did get a bit heated at times, but never in any way that went against the rules. Just what one would expect of normal political stuff.

As the meeting was winding down, they touched on perhaps the most important subject... who was actually going to fight the Prima Guardian?

"It shouldn't come as a surprise, but Earth does not need any assistance dealing with this system event. I truly don't believe we will find ourselves unable to handle it, or the difficulty of this event will be so high that none shall pass," Miranda said. "That is even considering the fact we are going for a perfect record. Also, we don't plan on delaying the engagement at all, but take down the Prima Guardian as quickly as possible."

As a reminder, the Prima Guardian event wasn't necessarily designed to just be a quick boss fight and then be done. Chances were it was meant to be a longer scenario based on the system messages given prior:

"In five years, the Guardian will arrive on Earth with its army and must be defeated within five years of arrival, or the Guardian will move to claim the world for itself as the barrier naturally falls."

This message kind of had two implications. The first was naturally that they had five years to do the event... but the wording of saying it will "move to claim the world" kind of indicated that perhaps this Prima Guardian couldn't move much or was limited in its movements somehow within these five years.

Not that these things mattered to Earth, as they planned on slaying the boss immediately. The barrier in the message was the one defending the Planetary Pylon, and the only way to dispel the barrier was to either have both keys – one given to the Guardian and one to Jake - or wait for five years after the Prima Guardian arrived.

"The plan is not to simply amass an army and try to defeat the Prima Guardian this way. I'm going to be honest; the vast majority would only get in the way. No, it's better to focus on reducing or entirely avoiding taking any damage from regular Primas and whatever else may come at us," Miranda continued. "For the Prima Guardian, we will assemble an elite team led by Lord Thayne himself. Those who are deemed qualified will be contacted shortly after the World Congress, and should there be anyone out there believing they are also qualified to participate, they can come to Haven and be tested. Just know that the standards are quite high, and I cannot promise the testing method is safe for those too weak."

Jake had honestly expected some complaints about this announcement, but surprisingly, no one said anything in disagreement. Perhaps they also realized it was better to have one small elite team rather than an entire army. In general, armies tended to be pretty ineffective in the multiverse unless they were facing other armies.

Sure, it was probably possible to overwhelm the Prima Guardian with sheer numbers, and even Jake would struggle if he was bombarded with spells from a few thousand weaker people. Unless he just dodged and ran away, that is.

No, it was for sure better to have one elite team. As for who would be on this team... well, many of the expected people. Jake wasn't entirely sure about everyone yet, but quite a few were already set, and the more Jake thought about the team that would face the Prima Guardian, the worse he felt for the poor boss.

With this final topic getting finished uncontested, there really wasn't much more to discuss. After a few more very minor topics and a few clarifying questions, there was just one more thing.

"To finish, please all take one of these," Miranda said as she summoned a large table filled with what looked like old phones in boxes. "These are developed by Arnold and allow anyone using them to contact a communication central from anywhere on the planet. Additionally, they all have location-tracking magic embedded in them, allowing those using it to send their exact location. Use them to relay information to Haven during this final preparation time, and at the same time, we will use them to keep everyone up-to-date."

Arnold had produced thousands of these magic phones over the last year or so, and Jake already knew they were spread far and wide. Jake had one himself at his home, though he had more of a landline with a direct connection to Miranda.

These phones, as Jake decided to call them, did have the slight downside that they had a pretty limited lifespan. The energy required to fulfill some of their functions wasn't infinite, and Arnold hadn't created any way to recharge them. At first, Jake believed this was a design flaw, but he came to realize it was entirely on purpose.

It was planned obsolescence and a way to protect his designs. Trying to break open the device or analyze it too much would result in the phone breaking itself. Of course, it was technically possible to break the magical encryption, keeping its secrets safe, but that was where the planned obsolescence came into play. Once they ran out of energy, all magic within would disappear, making the phones no more than fancy bricks. So, the encryption didn't need to be unbreakable, just good enough to hold up until the phone died.

Miranda also made sure to warn people of this.

"Just a small side note: do not try to mess with these, or you may break them. We also expect every single one returned after the event is concluded, and a hefty fine will be given if they are lost or damaged in any way. So don't get any fancy ideas, alright? Also, if they leave Earth, they break, so be sure not to do that," Miranda said as Jake saw a few people visually deflate, as they had definitely planned on analyzing or sending the phone back to their factions in another universe.

Analyzing void-related magic, which many – including Jake – suspected these phones used, was of immense interest to even the larger factions.

Also, if anyone did decide to try and take the phone anyway, Earth would get paid handsomely, making this quite a potentially profitable strategy. It was all a great deal for Earth and the coffers of the World Council even if people didn't turn in their phones, and ultimately, it wasn't like Arnold was using some super-secret tech. Arnold had even made clear he expected a number to be "forgotten."

Distributing the phones, nearly every person of influence from the different factions got a good handful to also give out to their subordinates. It really was a massive undertaking, and Jake was glad he wasn't the one working at this communication center Miranda had set up in Haven.

Once all the phones were given out and a bit more small talk, it truly was time to announce the end of the Fourth World Congress of Earth, as Miranda spoke loudly with all eyes on her.

"I wish to thank you all for coming today, and despite a brief moment of rudeness, I believe things went rather splendidly," Miranda said with a smile. "Continue to work hard, everyone, and together, may we reap the best rewards possible. Who knows... maybe there's even some achievement if we're the first planet in this entire universe to take down the Prima Guardian."

With these words, a countdown appeared, marking the end of the congress. The countdown would last an hour for everyone to just do their own thing. During this time, Vesperia looked quite busy as many approached her, and Jake decided to spend this time briefly saying hello to some of his friends before he and everyone else were thrown back from whence they came.

Which, in Jake's case, was his lodge.

Oh, and would you look at that... there was an empty alchemy lab right beneath it. It would sure be a shame to leave it unattended while there was still a bit of time to spare. No one would object to that, right?

#### Chapter 926: A Very Black Blade

Time was a cruel mistress... but so was Miranda when she told Jake he couldn't just run down to his laboratory and keep playing with poisons while ignoring the world around him. They only had a few weeks before the Prima Guardian event began, and apparently, that meant Jake had to be "mentally available" or something like that.

At least, this was what she said after returning to his lodge from the World Congress. Jake had appeared first, with Miranda, Lillian, and Vesperia popping in only a dozen or so seconds later. They all chose to take this time to sit down and briefly talk over what had happened – after Miranda stopped Jake from sneaking off to the lab, that is.

Once she had assured Jake wouldn't run off, Miranda let out a loud sigh as she relaxed her shoulders and found a chair to lean back on. "That congress was exhausting, but I guess it went as well as could be expected."

"Would have been better if there wasn't that one guy..." Lillian sighed, shaking her head. "It seems extreme, but it had to be done."

"Do not pity a fool who dared go against rules explicitly explained to him," Vesperia said in a rather harsh tone. "He is lucky death was his only punishment. A rather light sentence if I say so myself. Having him imprisoned and his soul serve as fuel or a seedbed would have been more appropriate for having the audacity to show such disrespect toward Sire."

"When you say seedbed..." Jake muttered.

"Some wasp Hive Queen variants are parasitoid in nature and use the bodies of other races to lay eggs in. It's quite effective, and if the body and soul of the target are well-maintained, you can use the same one for quite a while," Vesperia explained casually with a smile. "I can look into spawning one of these Hive Queens next if you are interested?"

"... no need to go out of your way for my sake," Jake said as he raised both hands. "Just do what you feel is best, okay? Totally fine if that doesn't include any of those variants."

Jake had to try hard not to say "scary as fuck" variants. Also, once more, he wanted to reiterate that Vesperia was a little bit terrifying at times. Just a bit.

"Very well, then I shall put it off for now," Vesperia nodded. Jake wasn't sure if she read his discomfort or if she noticed Miranda and Lillian both pulling back from her a bit when she began talking about imprisoning and laying eggs in people.

"Anyway, back on topic... to be honest, of everyone you could kill, someone loosely affiliated with the Holy Church was probably the best," Miranda said, everyone happy to move from one horrible fate to another – at least from Jake's point of view. "I did briefly confirm that he was baptized, so at least he will go to the Holy Land as a spirit to live out the rest of his days. Still not a great fate for sure, but this incident isn't enough to damage our relationship with any factions either."

"I definitely didn't assume he would just die for good," Jake said with a light smile.

"Even if he had, his death would have been a necessary sacrifice to reinforce your rule and position on the planet," Miranda said nonchalantly.



Jake nodded as he looked out of the window at the pond. For some reason, he couldn't help but remember when Miranda, Hank, and his two kids had just arrived here in Jake's small valley and offered to build this lodge for him. He also remembered the conversation way back then he had with Miranda, where he casually mentioned he had killed people and how horrified she had been at the notion. How she had believed he would kill her, too, simply because he was now a killer or something.

Things sure have changed, Jake thought with a wry smile. Now, she viewed killing someone during a political meeting as nothing more than another potential tool to gain an advantage. Lillian had always been a bit rougher, but she had also gotten far less soft... everyone from back then had. Well, besides maybe himself. Jake didn't really feel like he had changed that much.

Then again, he probably wouldn't really notice any subtle minor shifts that happened over long periods of time. He couldn't with full confidence say he was the same person he was before Nevermore, as he had learned a lot during that time, especially when it came to working with others and relying on their skills. Before the World Wonder, he rarely fought with others, while now, he had nearly spent more time of his life fighting alongside others than alone – though he did find quite a few openings to do some solo hunting during Nevermore.

Either way... they had definitely all changed quite a bit since the early days of the system. If not in personality, then at least what they were now capable of and willing to do.

"Do you need me to do anything while we wait for any updates from Jacob regarding finding where this Prima Guardian will crash down?" Jake asked Miranda after a bit.

"No, but as I said, I need you available. Once we have a better idea, the plan is to gather the elite team nearby where the boss will appear and strike as quickly as possible once we get a clear understanding of how exactly the event will transpire," Miranda said. "I have already contacted the Chosen of the Lord Protector, who will assist in transporting the team. That way, even if we're slightly off, the group should be able to arrive at the Prima Guardian nearly instantly."

"What if Sandy is restricted somehow?" Jake asked with a bit of worry.

"We're gambling on them not being too restricted. There is no precedent of the system outright mind-controlling anyone during a system event, and limiting the movements of every single creature who's absorbed system-given unique items on the entire planet seems too much," Miranda explained. "With

all that said, we will also have some teleportation circles set up should the unexpected happen. Better to be overprepared than underprepared.”

“Cheers to that,” Jake smiled, as he was already looking forward to the event. He really hoped the Prima Guardian would put up a good fight, though a big part of him had some doubt. But, who knows, maybe there was some way to make it harder for themselves for a bigger reward or something. Yeah, that would be awesome.

“Well, I believe we should head off now; there is still much to do,” Miranda said as she and Lillian stood up. She also looked at Vesperia who had been sitting silently. “Also, I have been meaning to ask, but will Her Majesty participate in the battle against the Prima Guardian? Are you able to?”

“Both willing and able,” Vesperia smiled. “I am still undecided if I shall help with the suppression of the regular Primas or take part in the battle against the Prima Guardian, but time shall tell. Perhaps I’ll simply do both.”

“Please just let me know your decision a bit beforehand,” Miranda nodded. “Having your assistance will prove most beneficial for certain.”

“Naturally,” Vesperia agreed without a trace of arrogance as if Miranda’s statement had just been the most obvious in the world. The witch didn’t take offense as she and Lillian headed toward the door. Just before exiting, she stopped and turned back.

“Oh, yeah, I was also asked to relay a message from Arnold. He said you had some weapon at his place, I believe? Everything should be ready for collection,” Miranda also added as she looked at Jake. “So, probably go and talk to him.”

“Not gonna lie, I had nearly forgotten he was working on stuff,” Jake admitted with a smile, happy for the reminder. “I’m gonna head there tomorrow. Gonna give Arnold some time to wind down after the World Congress first.”

That was only the polite thing to do. Jake also wanted the rest of the day to himself so he could just relax, and he got the impression Arnold could also do well with some alone time. They both weren’t the biggest people-persons, after all.

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“You do what you deem best. See you around, and remember... stay available,” Miranda said as a final reminder before she and Lillian left to continue working hard. Meanwhile, Jake stayed back with Vesperia, who also had her own matters to tend to.

As for Jake... well, a little alchemy had never hurt anyone, as he briefly popped by the laboratory. Also, Joke’s on Miranda; even if Jake couldn’t run off to his laboratory all the time, he could still do alchemy stuff outside his lab when she wasn’t looking.

The next day, he did as promised and headed off toward the Fort to meet up with Arnold. With a Pulse of Perception, he also confirmed Sandy was there, chilling and eating stuff, he reckoned. The arrangement the two had found was kind of funny but definitely mutually beneficial, as Arnold used Sandy as inspiration for better space-faring inventions, and Sandy used Arnold as a vending machine that also provided free housing accommodation.

Teleporting to Arnold’s place and sneaking his way in didn’t take long. The place had naturally grown even larger once more, as Arnold really had made a giant underground complex by now. It nearly reminded him of an ectognamorph hive, except this one had actual metal walls everywhere with halls filled with assembly lines and teleporters connecting everything.

The huge factories were especially impressive, and it was hard to believe everything was made by one man. Well, one man who created a lot of robots to do stuff for him.

Funnily enough, he still had a pretty small-ish workshop he usually did most of his work in. It had also barely changed since the early days and was more or less just a couple of tables and a bunch of computer-like things.

Jake didn’t meet him in this room, though. In fact, Jake doubted Arnold ever invited anyone to his room. Instead, he went to a far larger workshop where the poor space worm was being held hostage by the evil mad scientist.

Arnold had already known Jake was arriving, and all the doors opened for him on the way before he stepped inside the workshop. Sandy was lying on their back, as Arnold had connected a lot of patches with wires to the big worm’s skin. A bit of mana constantly emanated from Sandy as several devices

measured everything, and Jake spotted the air almost shiver a bit around the worm as the environmental space mana reacted.

“Seems like you two are having fun,” Jake commented with a smile as he looked at Sandy. “I’m a bit surprised you didn’t wanna participate in the World Congress. No, actually, I guess it’s more accurate to say I’m surprised no one forced you to take part in the congress to show off Earth’s power or something.”

“Hey Jake! I considered going, but it sounded like a pain, and from what I heard, it was super boring anyway,” Sandy said, being entirely accurate with their words. “All I have to do is act as a shuttle anyway, right?”

“Pretty much,” Jake shrugged, turning to Arnold next. “Is Sandy really still that useful of a test subject? Can’t be cheap to keep that glutton around.”

“I still feel like I am only scratching the surface when it comes to exploring subspace travel and the seemingly infinite spatial layers that surround us at all times,” Arnold said as he didn’t look away from the screen in front of him. “The data obtained so far has already proven invaluable, and while I am impossibly far from applying the concepts of the Cosmic Genesis Worm in any meaningful setting, I have begun to extract aspects that may prove useful within a reasonable timeframe.”

“I am awesome indeed,” Sandy wholeheartedly agreed. “You should also praise me more. Everyone should.”

“Don’t want it getting to your head, now do I?” Jake smiled as Sandy and Arnold seemed to get along well, even if their relationship was strictly professional. Still, the thought of Sandy and Arnold traveling space together, with Sandy constantly mocking the scientist’s spaceships, was a mental image Jake couldn’t get out of his head.

“Hey, even a worm needs affirmation sometimes. Unlike you, every single system event isn’t tailor-made for me to stand out and look cool on Leaderboards or through getting big titles,” Sandy complained.

“Are you saying you don’t have any titles?” Jake questioned, actually unsure.

"I never said that. I only said I don't get them from constant system events," Sandy quickly clarified. "Besides, titles are overrated. I'd rather collect legendary and mythical skills instead."

"That is a good pursuit, too," Jake smiled. "Titles are still nice, though."

"Legendary... oh right," Arnold suddenly muttered, as Jake felt the subtle movement of mana. A few seconds later, a shaft opened in the ceiling as a drone flew down, carrying a case that looked just about the right size to contain what Jake had come to acquire.

The drone stopped right above Jake, who took the cue and caught the metal case it dropped. Arnold finally spun around on his chair and stood up as he spoke. "The weapon has been complete for thirty-two days now, but I wanted to keep it here for at least twenty days even after completion to assure its stability within the material realm."

Jake just nodded, wondering what the guy had done to his Nanoblade katar.

"You are free to open the case," Arnold said, Jake quickly following suit.

Opening it, he saw the katar within. Its design was the same as usual. However, it took him a moment to properly distinguish the katar within the box from the foam around it.

To clarify. It took Jake, with all his Perception, a moment to see it.

The reason was that the entire box was entirely black, as the katar had obviously seeped out a bit of energy into the foam, turning it the exact same color. A color so black it didn't seem like it was supposed to exist.

It reminded him... he had seen this exact blackness before in the void between worlds. But, looking at it in a setting like this felt incredibly eerie and off, and Jake quickly used Identify on the new Nanoblade... or perhaps it should now be renamed the Voidblade.

[Voidblade Katar (Legendary)] – A katar wielded by a hunter, born from the mind of one touched by the void. The blade is made of a resilient composite metal that has been infused with void energies over

time. This has made the blade incredibly sharp, allowing it to effortlessly cut and penetrate nearly all physical material. When striking mana-based entities, the blade must be constantly infused with nascent void energy, or it will be unable to deal any damage or interact with the target. The handle of the katar can absorb all forms of mana infused into it and transform it into nascent void energy. This effect is more potent if the energy infused is the arcane affinity of the hunter. The blade will passively make void any other forms of energy interacting with it as long as it has sufficient nascent void energy. Has been stabilized so it can exist within the material plane. This also makes it able to enter spatial storage. Enchantments: Voidblade. Forced Spatial Stabilization.

Requirements: lvl 275+ in any humanoid race.

He read the description very carefully as he took a deep breath. It was... a lot better than Jake had expected. It was also a bit confusing, though. Especially that it referred to a hunter several times, which was obviously Jake himself. Luckily, Arnold quickly explained.

"I created the Voidblade Katar using your old Nanoblade Katar as a base. The materials were already of high value, and through further refinement and infusion of nascent void energy, the results were better than expected. Using entirely new materials could perhaps have resulted in improved material integrity; however, I chose this approach to also preserve some of your Records within the katar, especially those gathered during your time in Nevermore. These Records proved useful and improved the final product significantly," Arnold said before continuing as he went over and lifted the weapon up.

"Using nascent void energy – a lesser form of void energy – is a challenging prospect within the material plane, as it's antithetical to the concept of matter and energy itself. Even calling void energy a form of energy is an oxymoron, as when there is void, there is no energy. However, the void can still be contained by other forms of energy too stable or resilient to be voided, which is what I have made here. The hardest aspect was the handle that allows you to also deploy this rudimentary form of void energy during combat by transforming your own mana. While this weapon is far from the ideal, it is the best I can make with my current abilities and means available."

Jake could only nod along as Arnold handed him the weapon, and when Jake finally felt it in his hand, the katar felt... odd.

"It doesn't weigh anything," Jake muttered.

"It does; it's merely unaffected by gravitational concepts and has an incredibly low mass," Arnold further clarified before he got a bit more serious. "Also, this is still a prototype. Should it break, or should you

discard it, please bring the weapon back, or at the very least, the pieces that remain. It's a valuable research asset, after all. In return, I will allow you to field-test it and continue to improve the weapon continually as my skills and power improve."

"Of course," Jake nodded, seeing that as a very low price for getting a free legendary weapon. He did know there was a bit more to this entire thing, though. "But, be honest... you also want to analyze the Records within, especially those related to the arcane affinity, right?"

"I have never made that a secret and assumed I was an implicit understanding," Arnold answered casually. "Again, I must reiterate. Do not lose the weapon. As I said, the handle was the hardest aspect of the weapon to create, in part because I had to use a catalyst to allow the transformation of regular mana to void energy. This catalyst is a high-level mythical item provided to me during Nevermore and something I would much prefer not to lose."

Jake frowned a bit, looking at the katar more closely. Quite the pressure to get put on him, carrying around some mythical void item within his weapon.

"I'll take good care of it," Jake nodded.

"Good," Arnold nodded as he looked to remember something else. "I may also have something else for you if you're interested?"

"I'm never one to say no to more loot," Jake smiled as he wondered what else Arnold could have in store.

## Chapter 927: Favors Owed & One Last Surprise

Jake wondered what more Arnold could have in store for him. He was definitely in need of a gear upgrade after Nevermore, as the place hadn't really given that much. It was only on the first part of the floors that equipment was really rewarded, while on all later floors, only raw materials for crafting were ever given. It was likely a form of balance to not fuck over crafters too much.

Still, it meant Jake had a lot of stats to be gained from equipment. Some of what he wore was still good, especially his boots, necklace, mask, one of his rings, and all his weapons, but much of his basic equipment had fallen behind.

The Shadestalker Legguards and Shadestalker Chestpiece he currently wore had already only been “pretty good” when he originally bought them. He had gotten them due to how reliable and simple they had been, both having the ability to nullify a bit of physical damage taken, self-repair, and also serve as okay stat sticks.

However, they hadn’t scaled with him as he leveled up, resulting in the damage nullification quickly becoming insignificant, the stats falling behind, and the only good thing about his gear now being how it looked and its ability to repair itself.

The reason why he focused primarily on his chestpiece and pants wasn’t just because they were the two things he wanted to replace the most, but because that was also exactly what Arnold brought in as a drone entered the room.

“Let me be upfront right away,” Arnold said before he opened the boxes that Jake saw the equipment within. “My ulterior motive in offering you these is because I expect them returned for analysis after a period of use. As you wear this equipment, it will be affected by your Records and arcane energy passively, and I have primed them for future analysis already. Additionally, I am but one of several crafters of this. I had assistance from a few acquaintances from other universes to procure materials and complete several parts.”

With those words, he opened one of the two boxes. One of them contained a leather jacket of sorts, though it definitely looked more medieval than modern, likely as a very deliberate design choice. It was dark in color, with a few dark green patterns here and there.

Also, while Jake called it a leather jacket, he wasn’t sure it was actually made of leather. Lifting up the jacket and looking at it closer, it felt surprisingly soft. It was also heavier than he expected, and not by a little. He would almost assume it was made of metal with how much it weighed... which an Identify proved was actually a very legitimate assumption.

[Titanssteel Nanofiber Chestpiece (Ancient)] – A marvel of different concepts merged seamlessly together to create an incredibly durable piece of clothing. The Titansteel has been refined into small fibers, making this armor nearly impossible to cut using regular means. Offers respectable resilience to all forms of magical attacks. This chestpiece is able to self-repair and remember all forms of energy passing through it, storing memories of its journey within. This function is especially effective during the self-repair process. Enchantments: +1500 Strength, +1000 Toughness, +1000 Agility, +750 Vitality. Self-Repair. Material Memory.



Requirements: lvl 275+ in any humanoid race.

He also quickly threw an Identify on the pants and saw a very similar result.

[Titansteel Nanofiber Pants (Ancient)] - A marvel of different concepts merged seamlessly together to create an incredibly durable piece of clothing. The Titansteel has been refined into small fibers, making this armor nearly impossible to cut using regular means. Offers respectable resilience to all forms of magical attacks. These pants are able to self-repair and remember all forms of energy passing through them, storing memories of their journey within. This function is especially effective during the self-repair process. Enchantments: +1500 Agility, +1000 Toughness, +1000 Strength, +750 Vitality. Self-Repair Material Memory.

Requirements: lvl 275+ in any humanoid race.

They were practically identical, outside of the fact that one was a chestpiece and the other a pair of pants. The stats were also shifted around a little bit, with one giving more Strength and the other giving more Agility, but it was nothing extreme.

He also noted how they gave quite a lot more stats than what he had right now... though perhaps that was only to be expected of a mid-tier C-grade item like this. They didn't have a lot going for them outside of the stats and just being super durable, so a lot of the Records could be allocated to just giving stats.

Also... one had to remember just how many stats Jake could actually get from gear. Jake could get just over 34,000 stats from gear total, with each of these offering 4250 stats total. Seeing as one could only wear ten pieces of equipment total, and that his mask and cloak didn't offer stats – and both tended never to – he wouldn't even hit the cap if he had eight pieces of equipment that gave as many stats as these two pieces of Titansteel Nanofiber armor.

And even getting this many stats wasn't easy. Certain pieces of gear tended to give more stats than others, with larger pieces usually giving more. In other words, the chestpiece and pants would give more stats than boots, gloves, and bracers. Jewelry did give more than anything else, but part of that was because they were just stats and didn't need to offer any innate protection.

To conclude... Jake would be lucky if he could reach his stat cap wearing a full set of ancient rarity equipment with a level requirement around his own. It was truly the woe of being strong and having a lot of percentage titles and a generally strong Path. The system had effectively deemed that someone like Jake needed quite a few legendary items as standard.

Not that Jake would ever say no to good ancient rarity stuff, and these two Titansteel Nanofiber gear pieces were pretty damn good. There was one thing that did bother him quite a lot though.

“Not gonna lie, it feels incredibly weird to have you just handing me clearly valuable stuff like this all the time. It isn’t like I’m doing much for you in return,” Jake muttered. “Sure, you say you analyze my Records and arcane affinity, but this definitely feels like an unbalanced trade and that we have an even more unbalanced relationship.”

Arnold was silent for a moment before he looked up at Jake with a serious expression.

“I do not make my decisions out of a sense of kindness or altruism,” Arnold spoke. “Your observation that our working relationship seems unequal is also entirely accurate and purposefully made to be that way. I have provided you with more tangible support than you have given me. However, rather than a loss, I view this as an investment in the future. An assurance, if you will. There currently does not exist any reliable method to protect against future problems, but I believe this to be the best option.”

Jake raised an eyebrow as Arnold continued. “There may come a day when I will need your assistance. At that time, I deem it highly beneficial that you feel like you owe me something, spurring you on to act. While the future is uncertain, your mentality on certain matters has proven itself a constant, and I believe my actions will result in you being willing to provide support should something unfortunate and unforeseen happen.”

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Arnold’s explanation was very... curt. And exactly the kind of explanation Jake would expect out of the scientist. He didn’t honey any of his words but outright stated he was effectively trying to manipulate Jake into feeling like he owed Arnold.

The thing is... he was entirely correct. Jake would help Arnold without thinking twice as things currently were. There were still some points of doubt, though.

"Gotta ask, are you expecting any problems since you need this assurance?" Jake asked.

"As of this moment, no. At least none I believe are likely to materialize in the near future that I cannot deal with myself. This is instead an assurance against the unknown. Perhaps nothing will ever happen, but considering our significantly expanded lifespans and the possibility of living eternally, it's effectively a statistical certainty I would one day need your unquestioned support," Arnold continued to answer honestly.

"Thanks for the honesty, I guess?" Jake muttered. It still felt weird that Arnold was effectively trying to bribe Jake into helping him with something neither of them even knew what was. But, no reason to say no to a good thing, and Jake was sure Arnold also knew he couldn't just make Jake do anything he wanted.

"No problem," Arnold clearly took Jake's words at face value. "To note, the Titansteel Nanofiber is also still a work-in-progress material, and I will make improved versions based on the Records they collect during your use."

"Does that mean you think you will eventually become able to make this armor consistently legendary rarity?" Jake questioned.

"Yes," Arnold nodded without a trace of doubt in his voice.

"Mass-produced legendary equipment, huh," Jake shook his head.

"Not mass-produced. The labor and materials going into each creation remain significant, and there are no plans to mass-produce the most powerful version. Lesser iterations will likely be made for cheaper material and using a methodology facilitating mass-production through automation. Additionally, while you may find my claim spurious, I wouldn't find it difficult to believe if you could also consistently transmute legendary material," Arnold clarified while also having a pretty good point.

"True, I probably could if the base material is good enough," Jake agreed. Yeah, probably shouldn't be surprising Arnold could consistently make legendary equipment if he had good enough materials.

"I can't really make anything at all!" Sandy decided to chime in uselessly. "But I'm confident I can eat more legendary stuff than both of you combined. Wouldn't even be a competition."

"It wouldn't be a competition because no one wants to compete with you," Jake said with a smile as he shook his head. "Though I would be up for a competition of energy-absorption. Specifically vital energy."

"No equipment of any kind allowed."

"Seeing as it's a part of my soul, does Eternal Hunger really count as equipment anymore? It's more an extension of my body," Jake shot back.

"With that logic, can I use anyone I've eaten to help in the competition? Because if so, let's have our competition at the Order, and I'll just have a few A and S-grade vampires jump in there real quick,"

Sandy argued back. "Seeing as they're literally part of my body when in my stomach, they don't count, right?"

"... you know what, I'll let you have this one rather than continue a discussion that's just making everyone in the room dumber for having listened to it," Jake muttered in defeat.

"Victory has been claimed!" Sandy said utterly shamelessly. "My ingeniousness is truly unmatched, only perhaps matched by a scarce few gods. And Tom, but Tom's just built different."

Arnold had also proven once more he was the smartest of them all because he had clearly not paid any attention at all to their stupidity, ignoring both Jake and Sandy.

Jake stuck around in Arnold's workshop a bit longer as he got his new katar and clothing before it was back home to the lodge for some more alchemy. Only very briefly, though, as Jake was repeatedly dragged around to do stuff with Miranda.

During this time, he also strongly considered going to the Order of the Malefic Viper for a little bit but stopped himself. It was just too risky to leave the universe, even if there probably wasn't a big chance anything would go wrong. Still, Jake couldn't help but consider what would happen if Ell'Hakan or someone else did some shit that stopped Jake from returning to Earth for the Prima Guardian event.

The reason why he had wanted to go visit the Order was naturally to check in with Meira and Irin primarily, but he also wanted to say hi to Scarlett, who he surprisingly learned wasn't returning for the Prima Guardian event at all. From what Jake gathered when he briefly heard from Reika, the snake simply didn't see any purpose in returning, seeing as she definitely couldn't actively participate in the event. She had consumed a lot of energy from system-provided unique items, making her only choice to ally with the Prima Guardian or sit out... and if she was going to sit out, she might as well sit out at the Order. From the sounds of it, she was also making many friends of the draconic kind, so good for her?

Anyway, even if Jake did want to go, he decided to delay till after the event. Besides, Jake still had a lot to do. To make sure he was warmed up, Jake even went on a few minor hunts to take down monsters that couldn't be negotiated with. None of them put up any good fights, but it was still good to flex his magical and actual muscles a bit once in a while.

Like this, the days quickly went by as the system event drew ever nearer, with new updates every day. The atmosphere of Earth had also changed significantly. With the entire planet on high alert and working in unison, it couldn't help but trickle down to even the regular person who was still only in E or even F-grade.

Those living in smaller settlements traveled to larger ones, defensive barriers were reinforced, and Miranda took practically every precaution Jake could imagine, as well as a few he hadn't even thought of. But, in his defense, he had kind of forgotten stuff like the fact some people had to eat to live. What a foreign concept, right?

When only about a week and a half remained, Jacob informed Miranda, and thus, by extension, everyone else, that he had located the exact spot where the Prima Guardian would arrive.

Jake had been correct in his assessment that it was in the massive desert on the opposite side of the planet from where the enlightened races lived. It was incredibly far away from them, but there wasn't any worry about the actual travel time to get there. With Sandy, it would barely take a day.

Also, even if Sandy turned out to be restricted or unavailable, space mages were already hard at work, putting down a track of teleportation circles. It was almost like a railroad where they put down magical circles in a line straight toward the spot Jacob had pointed out.

The one in Haven overseeing the project was also a familiar face who Jake hadn't interacted much with for a long time. It was Neil, who'd also returned from Nevermore quite a bit stronger. Jake remembered that the guy had always been more focused on the crafting side of space magic, and he had really embraced that by now, being one of the top people managing Earth's teleportation network. Still, that didn't mean he couldn't fight, as space magic was still a very potent school of magic.

Over these final days, everyone also started to arrive in Haven, as that was where they would fly out from. A few had already gone to where Jacob was beforehand, but the vast majority headed to Haven. All the familiar faces were naturally there, with a lot of the more "mid-tier" elites also coming. Even if they wouldn't face the Prima Guardian as part of the strike team, Sandy would still help transport them, as they would form a perimeter to fight this "army" that would arrive.

All in all, it was definitely a massive undertaking to prepare everything, and Jake was happy he hadn't been in charge of any of it. Instead, he had managed to make a good batch of top-tier Heartrot Poison and a few dozen acid bombs he was very much looking forward to seeing if he would have to use. He really hoped he would.

With everyone gathered in Haven and ready to go, Jake didn't expect any more surprises. What could there even be at this point they hadn't accounted for? Well... there was one thing... or, more accurately, one person. Because, with only a day to go before they would head off from Haven to the Prima Guardian touch-down spot, Miranda contacted Jake:

"Jake, I'm coming over immediately... William is back and needs to talk to you."

## Chapter 928: An Emotional Plan

William wasn't the type of person Jake thought much about. Not anymore. After he had turned his back on Eversmile and become a heretic, Jake didn't really hear much about the young metal mage who had turned his Tutorial into a shitshow anymore. Sure, in the back of his mind, Jake probably knew he was doing stuff somewhere, but he hadn't been someone worth dedicating much brain power to consider.

So it came as a genuine surprise when the mage wanted to meet Jake. His timing was also highly suspicious, being this close to the Prima Guardian event. Jake didn't think he was there to sabotage them, though, as if he was, going through Miranda and wanting to meet Jake was perhaps the dumbest strategy.

Nevertheless, Jake was suspicious.

As promised, Miranda and William arrived not even ten minutes after he was informed they were coming over. Miranda had even deployed some kind of stealth field as she walked alongside the metal mage. When Jake saw them enter the valley fully, he instantly Identified William as there was one thing he wanted to confirm first and foremost.

[Human – lvl 276 – Heretic]

Still a heretic, Jake thought with a bit of relief while also noting the guy's level was pretty good. Still behind Jake and the other top elites, but only by half a dozen levels. He also didn't believe William could have spoofed the identification in any way. Besides, posing as a heretic tended not to end well, and Jake didn't doubt quite a few people would outright attack William upon seeing the tag.

Jake also noted how William looked a lot calmer. Serene, almost. Or perhaps it was just because Jake was used to the guy having quite an intense and somewhat crazy look in his eyes, and now he appeared a lot more normal and put-together. In any case, it definitely looked like getting out from under Eversmile's boot had done him good.

It wasn't like Eversmile seemed to give a damn Jake had turned William to the dark side, either. Sure, he wasn't friendly around Jake, but he hadn't been outright hostile either. He genuinely didn't seem like he cared much. Then again, maybe Eversmile just viewed it as another interesting development for his research. Yeah, that totally seemed like something Eversmile would do.

Sitting on the porch, Miranda and William approached, with Miranda being the first to speak. "Sorry for the lack of warning before the visit."

"It's my fault," William spoke up, indeed seeming a lot more mellow than usual. "I just returned to Earth today from Nevermore, having entered the World Wonder quite late."

"Speaking of Nevermore... you went there in D-grade, so how much time did you lose in C-grade?" Jake asked. Probably not the most pressing question, but he was curious.

"Just the time I was there in D-grade," William shook his head. "Though it did disqualify me from competing on the Leaderboards, not that I ever planned on doing that in the first place. I didn't have a party to go with, but I just found a group in Nevermore City. Ended up joining six different parties during my time there, and that isn't even to mention the members swapped out while in each party."

“Sounds tough,” Jake commented, though to be honest, he didn’t really care overly much. He did care about the timing of this visit, though. “Quite a day you decide to return. Either you are extremely talented in timing when you would be done with Nevermore, or there’s something fishy going on here.”

“I didn’t finish... I had about a year and a half left, but I knew I couldn’t delay my return any longer. In truth, I already cut it a lot closer than I originally planned to, as I had a contact in Nevermore who was delayed,” William explained, Jake not detecting any clue he was lying. Still, he remained highly suspicious.

“Alright, fine. I also get that you probably want to participate in the Prima event, but needless to say, you aren’t going to be part of the strike team,” Jake wanted to clarify quickly. He simply wouldn’t trust his back to someone like William... well, alright, Jake wouldn’t care much about his own back, as he would definitely see the backstabbing coming, but he didn’t want people who didn’t have an overpowered Bloodline to trust William either.

“That’s fine,” William said. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“William disappeared from Earth around the same time you went to Nevermore, and I confirmed he was no longer on the planet,” Miranda chimed in. “This meeting is because of where he went during that time.”

This did catch Jake’s attention as he looked at William inquisitively.

“I went to Ell’Hakan’s homeworld,” William said, not beating around the bush. “I did this during the time Ell’Hakan and the majority of the other high-ranking individuals were gone to Nevermore. I spent over a year there, exploring the planet.”

“His planet, huh... how did you even find it?” Jake questioned. Truthfully, Jake had looked into Ell’Hakan’s homeworld before and found nothing. Even the Viper didn’t actually know where his homeworld was. The abilities of the gods to peer into the ninety-third universe remained limited, and while the Viper would easily see any area around Jake or others he had blessed, he couldn’t simply scout the entire universe.



Even in other universes, trying to find one particular planet could be extremely annoying. There was one pretty reliable way, though. One it appeared William had used.

"I met Ell'Hakan when he came to Earth. I formed a faint karmic connection with him, and I held onto that bond. Using it to find his planet was far easier than I expected. Far easier than it should have been, as his world is... wrong," William explained.

"Explain," Jake frowned.

William took a moment before he spoke. "On Earth right now, karma is an endless web. It's a confusing mess of different connections between people, and it's what most would call natural. The karmic connections have been formed through genuine emotion. The bond between friends looks like friends, lovers like lovers, and so on. It isn't like that on Ell'Hakan's planet. Not at all."

Jake kept quiet as the young-looking man continued.

"I think a bit of background is in order. Karma is a powerful aspect of Yip of Yore's powers, yes, but Ell'Hakan has specialized further. His Bloodline is almost tailor-made to create powerful karmic connections between himself and others, and it's through this karma he exploits them. As the Chosen of Yip of Yore, they both gain power based on others' belief in their legends, and the more strongly others believe their legends, the more real these legends become. The more power they get," William continued his explanation.

"I told you that here on Earth, the karmic web looks like expected, but on Ell'Hakans homeworld, it's just fucked up. Effectively, the entire population shares one singular karmic bond, more powerful than any other. A singular stronger connection than their parents, partners, and children. Above everyone else, there is Ell'Hakan, the Celestial Child."

"What exactly does this mean?" Jake questioned.

"Rather than a mortal or a mere leader, they view him more as a god... no, a being even higher than a god. They genuinely love and revere him. His word is truth, his actions just. They even believe he is unbeatable and that even if an actual god tried to slay him, they wouldn't stand a chance. Honestly, Yip of Yore's Path fits him so damn well it's disgusting, as this powerful belief gives him actual tangible power."

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Jake's frown only deepened the more William spoke. For a long time, Jake's theory had been that Ell'Hakan had a skill not that dissimilar to Jake's Big Game Hunter, except rather than being triggered by higher-leveled opponents, it was triggered by the belief in his legend. If that was the case... did that mean he had a powerful passive boosting skill active at all times due to the belief from his homeworld?

There was one pretty damn simple potential method to overcome this kind of skill, though. Especially as a boosting skill like this could very well come with some form of backlash should Ell'Hakan lose belief in his legend.

"His legend is built on a lie. If we reveal the truth, it--"

"Won't matter," William sighed as he shook his head. "I tried. Caught a few people and showed them the truth, including some things he said to me that directly contradicted his own doctrine. It had absolutely no effect. Truth isn't anything they care about anymore; it's pure fanaticism."

"Even if the majority of the population is brainwashed, there must be some people to disagree with his rule or people who managed to break out of this delusion," Jake tried to argue.

"I didn't detect a single one," William said before he was silent for a bit, before asking a question Jake had never considered. "Do you know when he took over his planet?"

"I would say shortly after the system arrived... but I have the feeling that isn't right," Jake said.

"Twenty years before the integration. For twenty years, Ell'Hakan had already ruled his planet. Unified all the factions and countries under his own banner as the Celestial Child while doing a purge of anyone who dared not view him as a being above any other. To them, he is the literal son of the twin moons and the sun of his planet. No, not a metaphor or anything... legend has it that on the day of a twin eclipse, he was born, gifted to their world by the stars themselves to rule and bring peace," William explained.

"Pretty sure only Starborn are born from literal stars," Jake joked as he found the notion utterly idiotic.

“To make things even worse, I did also find his actual parents, though they seemed to believe they had only been the ones to raise him, despite the biological connection,” William continued. “I want to reiterate. Everything I’ve said is something every single person on the planet believes with utter unswayable conviction. They are completely fanatical. If he told them all to kill themselves, they wouldn’t even ask the reason before doing it.”

“So they’re like the fanatics of the Holy Church,” Jake said, really not needing more people like that in his life.

“They are far worse. Followers of the Holy Church at least know they can go to the Holyland if they die or they get some other benefits. In the end, they still act somewhat selfishly and logically, believing their deaths either serve a greater goal or help their family and friends,” William disagreed. “What is happening on Ell’Hakan’s planet isn’t that at all... it’s something the Holy Church could only dream of achieving.”

Jake was in thought for a bit before asking the big question: “I appreciate this information, but I’m still not sure why you needed this urgent meeting or exactly what you want me to do with this knowledge. You don’t sound like you’re offering any solutions here.”

“I’m not,” William sighed. “But let me get to the crux of it. Ell’Hakan’s Bloodline allows him to manipulate emotions, something I’m sure you’ve already experienced, right?”

“Right,” Jake nodded. He really fucking hated that Bloodline. His own was way better and way less insidious.

“What you’ve experienced is only a mere fleeting moment of it. I want you to imagine what continued exposure can result in, especially when the feelings they foster are never contradicted or argued against. It makes the emotions utterly engrained in your being and something you don’t question. But it’s more than that... because these emotions weren’t born naturally but forcefully empowered through the influence of a Bloodline. Empowered to a whole new level of emotions – a new conceptual stage - I don’t even think we can imagine, and that’s coming from someone who’s been introduced to quite a few entirely new emotions throughout his life,” William explained in-depth.

“People already let emotions rule them more than logic, and this takes that to an extreme. These emotions become so strong there is no way to sway them. They embedded themselves in the soul,

becoming core parts of a person. I'm not saying disillusioning someone from Ell'Hakan's manipulation is impossible, but you will need far more than merely showing them the truth. You will need something magical in nature to break this illusion they live under."

"You still haven't gotten to why this is so urgent," Jake pointed out, as he felt like William was rambling quite a bit. He knew the guy liked to talk from way back in the Tutorial, but this was getting a bit much for what was effectively just the guy telling Jake Ell'Hakan's Bloodline was dangerous.

"During the Prima Guardian event, Ell'Hakan has chosen to assist the other planets and not do the event alone. He leads this alliance and will get all other World Leaders in a room with him and access to hundreds of planets. He will spread his legend and create powerful diplomatic connections. People will go to his planet, he will go to theirs, and that's where things get really dangerous..."

William raised a hand as a bit of mana gathered. "You control the nearby Pylon of Civilization. That means all of the territory the Pylon covers is infused with a bit of Records and energy at all times, correct?"

Jake nodded, as he suddenly had a realization. Wait, he can't mean-

"The same is true for Ell'Hakan. Your Records have resulted in this Pylon being quite scary to all beasts, and as I'm sure Ms. Wells can attest to, it passively has helped everyone increase their resistance to auras merely living here. Now imagine if this same concept is applied to Ell'Hakan controlling a Pylon," William said.

"He plans on gaining control of other Planetary Pylons by swaying the local World Leaders," Jake had already realized. If a Pylon of Civilization covered a city in the Records and partial aura of a person, a Planetary Pylon definitely covered the whole planet... which would mean...

"That's what I believe he is planning," William nodded. "He wants to make other worlds like his own by making his Bloodline passively affect everyone living on these planets, turning them into fanatics. To make worlds where absolute reverence toward him is the baseline. While I'm sure there is a cap to his boosting ability, it's still undisputable that he gains more power the more people believe in his legend. I'm sure he has other ways to use this energy that's effectively faith, so if he gains control of more planets, his power will only grow to new heights. So that's why this is urgent. If Ell'Hakan runs wild, he may just lay claim to the entire Milky Way galaxy before Earth even makes meaningful contact with other planets."

“Well... fuck,” Jake could only say as he still wondered. “How do you even know all this? I just want to make sure this isn’t pure speculation on your part, even if it does sound pretty damn possible.”

“I had it confirmed and explained by the person who is effectively the Prime Minister of Ell’Hakan’s empire,” William answered with a smile. “He was more than happy to tell me everything.”

Jake narrowed his eyes as William just flashed a small smile. “Ell’Hakan is not the only innately manipulative person. It wasn’t hard to convince the guy I served Ell’Hakan and Yip of Yore by acting as the contact person between Eversmile and them. That my job was to assist in their quest. It didn’t take long before we were the best of friends and he told me all their plans as I only nodded along in excitement.”

“What are the chances this is all false information planted by Ell’Hakan to throw us off some other real goal?” Miranda asked after a few seconds.

“I doubt it is,” William shook his head. “Everything lined up too well, and I doubt he believed anyone would or even could go to his planet. It isn’t somewhere that’s easy to find at all, and he’s even done a lot to keep it hidden. While I don’t have much to thank Eversmile for and far more reasons for grief, he did teach me some valuable things that allowed me to find it.”

The three of them were silent for a moment as Jake considered everything they had talked about. After a bit, Miranda spoke up.

“When the Prima Guardian dies, this alliance system will also open up to us... we should take this chance to compete openly with Ell’Hakan. Ell’Hakan has recently tried to act more amicable toward Jake, so he can’t outright try and shut us out without it looking like he’s going back on his word,” Miranda said.

Jake considered her words and could only nod. In truth, this had also kind of been the plan... though more so because it looked like a chance to do some fun exploration while even fighting more bosses.

“The most important thing is for others not to hand over their planetary cores to Ell’Hakan,” William nodded. “Because if they do... I’m not sure what the solution would be.”

“To kill Ell’Hakan,” Jake shrugged. Seemed pretty easy.

“That won’t make these emotions go away,” William sighed. “The level of fanaticism exists independent of him. My guess is that they will assume he didn’t truly die but just ascended or will be revived in the future or some shit.”

... Jake really hated dealing with goddamn fanatics.

## Chapter 929: Mysterious Third Party

William’s revelations about Ell’Hakan and the shit he had been up to were quite something. It sure as hell gave Jake some food for thought, and he did end up asking some more clarifying questions, some of which the metal mage could answer and some he could only speculate about.

One of the things Jake was curious about was how long it would take for people to get what was effectively brainwashed after Ell’Hakan took over a planet, something William naturally couldn’t really know as it hadn’t happened yet.

However, he had been on Ell’Hakan’s planet for over a year. During this time, he had constantly been subtly affected, yet he felt nothing from it, making him believe the manipulation was so subtle that any reasonable level of pushback would nullify the effect. True, William did mention thinking that “maybe he isn’t that bad” a few times, but a quick thought that “no, he actually sucks” was enough for him to remain unaffected.

This made William guess that this passive takeover only really worked if there was no disagreement but pure cultural homogeneity. It wasn’t like he could just take over a Pylon, and suddenly everyone loved him. It was a slow, insidious process that only took hold after continual exposure in a highly controlled society.

That’s assuming the goal was to make them worship Ell’Hakan.

William also reminded Jake that Ell’Hakan’s Bloodline wasn’t to make people feel positive emotions toward him. It was to manipulate emotions. It wouldn’t be a far fetch to believe that Ell’Hakan could manipulate the core emotion amplified by the Pylon of Civilization’s or Planetary Pylons to be anything he wanted... such as to amplify faith toward other gods, factions, or individuals.

Ell'Hakan could also not make it about any positive emotions at all. He could make it about the hatred for others. He could slowly spread a creeping feeling that Jake actually sucked, and if further amplified with some good propaganda campaigns, this hatred could quickly spread, especially to those who didn't really have any opinion of Jake prior, making all the exposure they ever had to him completely negative. Shit this already worked pretty damn well without any Bloodline-powered manipulation.

Honestly, Jake was even beginning to wonder if maybe Ell'Hakan was the one with the most overpowered Bloodline of the two of them... alright, that was a bad joke. Ell'Hakan's Bloodline probably didn't even give any Perception.

To clarify, while what Ell'Hakan was doing did seem extremely fucked up... it wasn't comparable to something like a plague, much less a karmic plague. It still required direct manipulation. It wasn't something that could spread on its own and get out of control. Comparing it to the Holy Church and their extreme propaganda was far more accurate, as even their indoctrination could sometimes reach such a level where it was borderline impossible to dispel the delusion. Combining both the indoctrination and the Bloodline, though... scary thoughts.

In any case, William had brought back some pretty damn valuable information. There were still a few things that struck him as weird, though.

"I've been thinking... why did you even go to his planet in the first place? What made you decide to go? Because, let's be honest, you don't seem like the kind to just do this out of the kindness of your heart. I also doubt you are invested in the good of this planet, so what made you do it?" Jake asked a thought that had bothered him for a while.

"Firstly, fuck that guy. I wanted to know if Ell'Hakan knew I was getting fucked over by Eversmile, and unsurprisingly, he did. So that's one reason. I want revenge, but I'm also fully aware I don't stand a chance at taking him down myself, so I'm hoping you can do the job," William said. "Secondly, I was hired to go explore the planet and report back to you about my findings."

Jake frowned as he looked at Miranda who just shrugged, clearly unaware this had been a thing. So, definitely wasn't her or anyone from Haven who'd hired him. On the top of his head, he couldn't figure out who it could even be. Especially not someone who would specifically ask William to report back to Jake.

"Who exactly hired you?" Jake questioned further.

"I don't know," William readily admitted. "The one I spoke to was clearly just a go-between of some kind, and I didn't ask too many questions. All I cared about was that they helped me teleport to the planet and offered information about when Ell'Hakan and others were gone, and some basic intelligence on the planet. Perhaps I was used, true, but I can accept that as I don't see myself losing anything doing this. Quite the opposite and I seriously doubt the one who hired me has any positive intentions toward Yip's Chosen."

"So some mysterious hooded guy just came up to you one day and asked you to go to this other planet for an even more mysterious third party, and you just said yes and rolled with it?" Jake asked, more than a little skeptical.

"It was a hooded woman, but yes, that's essentially what happened. I did try to track down who may have been behind it all, but no traces anywhere. I did find the corpse of the woman who had been used as a go-between, though, but that's where the trail went entirely cold, so they know what they're doing, even hiding their karma," William said.

"Alright, so it gets worse. Someone who is willing to kill people they worked with prior was behind hiring you, and who is powerful enough to manipulate karma to some extent... and they did this while only telling you to report to me and not anyone else?" Jake said, trying to wrap his mind around everything. "This makes no fucking sense."

"I am not disagreeing," William just said. "I'm just the messenger here, and I've now delivered my message. I truly didn't come for anything else, and in truth, I would probably have preferred only reporting to Ms. Wells, but I made a promise to report to you, and as someone walking a Path of karmic magic, it would hurt me quite a lot if I broke such a promise."

"Hm..."

Jake sat there for a few moments as he thought everything through. He didn't really have any more questions, and he did see that William handed Miranda what was effectively a report of all his observations. Now, this report was originally meant for Jake, but Miranda took it in his place, as she was actually going to read and study it all closely. It appeared that the metal mage had done quite a good job with his scouting mission.



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“What are you planning on doing next?” Jake asked William after he was done thinking.

Their conversation had been relatively short, but Jake felt less negative toward the metal mage now than before. Perhaps it was just for the simple reason that this was the first time an encounter had actually been beneficial to Jake. He hadn’t done anything to piss off Jake either but had seemed mellow and a lot more down to earth. Even his ego, which used to be a bit too overinflated, had become pretty reasonable.

Still, Jake wasn’t going to let him be in his good graces after a single encounter, much less trust the guy. Jake knew it could be argued the current William wasn’t even the same person that had been in his Tutorial... but that didn’t mean the thought of repeating their last encounter of the Tutorial didn’t occur to him.

“I’m going to participate in the Prima Guardian event. I missed so many other events because of Eversmile, and I’m not going to miss another. I won’t interfere with the strike team for the boss, but I can at least help on the perimeter to kill a few Primas,” William answered. “After that, I hope the plan is to do what Ms. Wells said and engage with the Prima Guardian Alliance to assist other planets. The difficulty of the Prima Guardian here on Earth will no doubt be the highest of the entire Milky Way, so if we can kill that, we can kill others. That will benefit Earth as we will get partial rewards from other system events while directly acting against Ell’Hakan’s plan.”

“Our plan is indeed to travel and help other planets out after we handled our own, right Jake?” Miranda said, with a look in her eyes that made it very clear he shouldn’t say no. Not that he would have.

“Do you really think I’m gonna miss a chance to fight a bunch of powerful bosses for cool rewards while even fucking over Ell’Hakan’s plans as a bonus?” Jake grinned. “Hell no. Not gonna pass up such a sweet opportunity.”

“Good... now I’m nearly feeling sorry for the poor planets that will have you storm in and just dominate their event and monopolize the rewards,” Miranda shook her head.

"Eh, I'm sure they can live with it if it also means their planet doesn't get overrun by an army of Primas that kill everything," Jake shrugged. "Seems like an acceptable trade-off."

Seeing as the conversation was very much winding down, the metal mage took his chance.

"I think that's all, so I'll be off now," William said as he stood up. "One last thing... if you ever need to go to Ell'Hakan's homeworld, let me know. I don't think anyone knows I've been there, at least no one that would warn him, so it should be possible to use the same method again. Just be aware it may be a one-way trip, at least with what I can provide."

"As long as you have the coordinates, that may be all I need when the time comes," Jake said in a serious tone. "But such a visit would be for after all these Prima Guardian-related matters are finished."

"Very well," William said with a nod as he hesitated for a moment before speaking. "And thanks for not killing me on sight, I guess."

"Don't give me a reason to," Jake said in a curt tone. "Better yet, give me reasons not to."

"I'll try," William said with a wry smile as he walked toward the exit of the valley. On the way, his form shimmered, and he began to fade away. With his insane Perception, Jake still saw him, but one thing was clear...

He has a stealth skill at least at the same level as Unseen Hunter. Probably, no, definitely, karma-related in some way. Powerful for sure.

This was the final thing with William... he had always been strong. Eversmile had just fucked him over a lot, and now that he was free, it was almost as if he had gotten new wings. Perhaps he was finally doing things for himself and because he wanted to, which had allowed him to grow into his own. In any case, Jake hoped he wouldn't become a problem because he was strong enough to be.

Now, this isn't saying Jake couldn't curb-stomp him into the afterlife, but it did mean he could be a troublesome fellow to hunt down and stomp into the ground mercilessly before he could do a lot of damage.

Jake was still far from trusting him. There was always the thought of what William had done. He had never really faced any “justice” for what he’d done, and Jake knew that William’s actions couldn’t just all be blamed on Eversmile. He had been a damn psycho all on his own before Eversmile got involved.

The thing is, now he was no longer a psychopath in that he literally had his brain fixed physically. Could it be argued this meant William wasn’t even the same person anymore? That he was only acting as he did because something was wrong with him that he was now cured of?

It was all so damn complicated... but it just felt off to kill William now, seeing as he was proving actually useful. Finally, Jake got the feeling that while he was now a heretic, Eversmile was far from done with the young metal mage.

With William gone from the valley, Miranda turned to Jake inquisitively. “What are your thoughts on this entire thing? Do you think all the information he gave is accurate?”

“It’s fishy as hell, but I think the majority is true. At least it all seems both probable and possible and entirely like something Ell’Hakan would be doing,” Jake said with a sigh. “I am a bit bothered by this mysterious person or faction who hired him, though.”

“You aren’t involved, right?” Jake also quickly sent telepathically to the Viper through the power of his divine direct connection.

“Nope, and I don’t even know who it is. I have a few theories, sure, but nothing I wanna share as it’s far from concrete. I will say that I doubt Eversmile is the one pulling the strings on this one, though. It may very well be an interested third party who wants to see Ell’Hakan taken down,” the Viper shared.

“Alright, just wanted to make sure, thanks,” Jake sent back as Miranda spoke.

“Yeah, I don’t wanna make any conclusions either if they are helping or acting against us, but I definitely don’t think they are on the side of Ell’Hakan. That isn’t to say they are on our side, though. It’s entirely possible they just want to use you to get rid of him or stop him from doing something they wish to avoid seeing happen. Though I guess we can assume the enemy of an enemy is a friend in this case, and we have no obligations as no deals have been made with us directly,” Miranda shared her thoughts.

“All very annoying,” Jake sighed loudly. “Why do schemers have to ruin everything? Why couldn’t we just have a nice fight against a big Prima Guardian boss along with its goons and then go home for a nice long alchemy session afterward?”

“You are aware you carry the True Blessing of one of the famously biggest schemers in the multiverse, right?” Miranda asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Everyone has their bad qualities that we as friends seek to overlook,” Jake sighed once more.

“... sometimes, I’m bewildered how you are even the Chosen of the Malefic One, seeing as you seem to be his least faithful follower,” Miranda said in a dry tone.

“We just have a super special relationship,” Jake said with a smile. He didn’t need to add that he thought it was a really sad state of affairs that being friends was considered a super special relationship, as that would come off as perhaps a bit too heretical... which again was super fucking sad.

“I wouldn’t dare argue against that,” Miranda said. “Sometimes I envy the casualness with which you carry yourself, even when interacting with a Primordial. I feel afraid to even talk when I’m with the Verdant Witches.”

“Different strokes for different folks, what can I say?” Jake said. It was just treading old water going over how odd his and the Viper’s relationship was, and Miranda had definitely realized its oddness a very long time ago. If not, Jake should definitely have fired her for lacking Perception.

The two of them sat there for a bit before Miranda got up. “I should return; there are still some last-minute preparations. You should also come soon; nearly everyone has already gathered.”

“I’ll just go with,” Jake said, also getting up as he stretched a bit.

It wasn’t that Jake needed to come for a strategy meeting or anything, as they planned to use the travel time for that while inside Sandy. Still, after the talk with William, Jake didn’t feel in the mood for alchemy but to hunt some Prima Guardian.

## Chapter 930: Prima Guardian Cometh

A relatively simple system event about killing a big boss had become a lot more complicated because Ell'Hakan was an asshole who just had to try and ruin a good thing.

However, ultimately, the goal of this event hadn't changed, and Jake wouldn't act any differently than he had already planned. The goal was still to kill Earth's Prima Guardian as quickly as possible, and then once their planet was safely secured, make contact with this Prima Guardian Alliance and offer them assistance. True, while there may now be extra benefits, Jake still wanted to do it because he wanted to fight more bosses.

Less than a day after William's visit, it had been time to set off from Haven toward where Jacob augured the Prima Guardian would arrive. The Sandy Express was already waiting and ready to go as everyone arrived. It wasn't just the strike team that would go with Sandy, but a few hundred people, as it also included many of the elites from Earth who would secure the perimeter. Many of these elites had traveled to Haven specifically to ride the Sandy Express rather than take the still-in-progress Teleportation Tram. The amenities within the giant space worm were also just far better.

Jake did smile at how quite a few were apprehensive about allowing a giant worm blessed by someone called the Boundless Hydra to effectively consume them. They did change their minds quickly once they were inside, though.

While recovering back at the Order, Sandy had some help to rebuild many of their stomachs, and knowing about the upcoming Prima Guardian event ensured that there were good living areas in one of the larger stomachs. Jake truly had no idea how big Sandy's internal world was by now, but making several massive halls filled with tables, a bar, private rooms with beds, and several forms of entertainment clearly wasn't a problem.

The strike team, as Jake kept calling the people who would fight the Prima Guardian, had their own private hall, where they all gathered. It was all the people Jake had expected to see, and it was also good to reunite with three out of his Nevemore party members.

Carmen, Eron, Caleb, the Sword Saint, Fallen King, Sylphie, Casper, Maria, Vesperia, and Arnold were naturally part of this strike team, the members being entirely the expected ones. Alright, maybe Arnold was a bit of a surprise, as Jake could totally have seen the guy choosing to stay at home to control everything behind a screen, but he had wanted to go in person. Even if he could exert the majority of his power from afar, it was probably still best for him to be as close as possible.

Someone who did choose to stay on the backlines was Miranda. She could have been part of the strike team if she wanted, especially with some setup time, but she would rather set up a domain a bit away to ensure no regular Primas could get past and run rampant. Which was totally fair, and in truth, Jake wasn't even sure how much she could have helped.

To note, most of the large factions had already gone to where the Prima Guardian would arrive a good while ago to set up with large groups. More accurately, they had set up a good distance away and spread out to try and cover so no monsters could sneak by and cause trouble.

During the travel, the thing with William and Ell'Hakan was naturally something Jake shared with the others of the strike team, though Jake did leave out some details, such as everything about this mysterious third party hiring the metal mage to go. Partly because it was a legitimate possibility that one of the factions these people belonged to had been responsible.

Jake wasn't saying any of them were trying to fool Jake, as he knew that many divine factions very much acted on a need-to-know basis, making it entirely possible Valhal, the Risen, Dao Sect, or any other faction was involved without the person belonging to that faction knowing about it.

Still, despite Jake's suspicion that someone's faction could get involved, that didn't make him hold back from having a good time while he chilled with everyone, as they quickly realized that all that stuff about strategizing wouldn't take days... not even an hour.

It could quite easily be summarized, as the Sword Saint put it:

"Without knowing exactly how we can or want to optimally engage the Prima Guardian, nor if there will be some change to the environment or we will have to face it inside of this meteorite it will allegedly arrive in, making any concrete plans make little sense. I also believe we all know how to handle ourselves and not get in the way of others, and through the Golden Marks of the Fallen King, we should be able to quickly communicate and adapt. Nevertheless, I believe the best strategy – assuming the Prima Guardian isn't far stronger than we believe - is that we hold nothing back but strike with the best we have right away once everyone is ready. Oh, and let's have Jake have the first attack. This Prima Guardian will definitely be peak C-grade or at least very close, making him the one with the most powerful opening attack," the old man said.

No one disagreed with that assessment, and besides such a basic plan, everyone would just have to act according to their roles and play to their strengths. Carmen would try and draw attention, being the most durable of them all, while Eron would act as their only dedicated healer while naturally also being virtually invincible. Everyone else also had their own fighting styles, and honestly...

The team that would take on the Prima Guardian was just insane. They had all the same people who did the Monarch of Blood way back in the day, with the addition of Arnold, Fallen King, Sylphie – as she wasn't strong enough then – and Vesperia. All of them were peak figures who could easily have been the supremely strongest of their own planets if they were elsewhere.

No... they could have been the strongest of their entire galaxies.

With all the super-serious strategy stuff over, they just all chilled and talked, and one of the centers of attention was definitely the complete “newcomer” to their group, who only Jake really knew: Vesperia.

Jake couldn't fault their curiosity... and he also got telepathic heads-ups from half the group that their factions had told them to try and get closer to the True Royal. Jake wanted to warn Vesperia that this was the case, but honestly, she definitely already knew and had it handled as she spoke politely while making sure never to reveal anything that wasn't pertinent to the upcoming Prima Guardian fight.

Vesperia, being such a center of attention, naturally also spilled over to other people showing interest in Jake... with two of them being a bit harder to deal with than the others.

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“You really are just out there popping out kids like a stupid couple trying to save their failing marriage,” Carmen commented as she looked at Vesperia, expertly dealing with Casper, who was definitely trying to pry some confidential information out as a representative of the Risen.

“He sure is living the single-father life,” Caleb said in complete agreement with a big grin on his face. “You know, he hasn't even brought back the True Royal and giant cosmic space worm to meet their grandparents yet?”

“Maybe he's just trying to prove he can make it without familial support?” Carmen said. “The mothers also seem out of the picture, huh?”

“I would have you know Mystie is still very much around,” Jake commented.

“Oh yeah, wasn’t she already with a partner when you got involved? Are you an adulterer?” Caleb said in a fake disappointed voice.

“I’m the uncle,” Jake argued. “Godfather and good friend of the family at most.”

“How about the two other mothers?” Carmen looked at Jake with a raised eyebrow as she leaned over to Caleb and whispered: “He’s probably saying they came from eggs or something like an excuse.”

“Only one of them came from an egg,” Jake sighed. “Sandy was already a whole worm before I came around, so you can’t tease me about being the dad there.”

Caleb looked at Jake with a serious expression. “Adopting does make them your child and you as morally and legally responsible as if they are biologically yours.”

“Yeah, Jake, don’t turn into a deadbeat,” Carmen grinned.

“This conversation is making me want to beat something to death,” Jake muttered.

“Hey, if you want any more kids, I’m sure Gwyndyr would more than happily have you visit,” Maria said, having walked over. “In fact, I’m pretty sure you would have a hard time finding any factions who aren’t interested in inviting the Harbinger of Primeval Origins... cool title, by the way.”

“Yeah, where does that even come from?” Carmen questioned. “I had people in Nevermore City refer to you with the same title. Like, I get what it means, but how come everyone agreed on this title?”

“Based on what the Malefic Viper said, it’s something to do with Records or something,” Jake shook his head. “Quite a few gods can apparently glean Records of the multiverse with the system giving stuff names they adopt and use. It kind of makes sense when you consider that I was offered a pretty damn good profession called Harbinger of Primeval Origins.”

“When you say offered, do you mean you didn’t pick it?” Caleb raised an eyebrow.



"I had one I wanted more," Jake just shrugged. Yeah, he really shouldn't ever mention the name of his actual profession, and he was very happy no one seemed to realize what it was either. Perhaps gods simply couldn't detect he was also a heretic, as part of being a heretic was innate resistance to gods detecting you.

"Fair enough," his brother didn't try to pry further. "Also, it's pretty funny seeing you share your intent to screw over Ell'Hakan and help other planets, as I was also informed by the higher-ups that they want us to assist a few planets from that Prima Guardian Alliance thing. We aren't the only branch of the Court of Shadows in our Milky Way, and as the only Judge, I am viewed as responsible for them."

"Valhal is a bit the same," Carmen commented. "In the sense we have a presence on two more planets in the Milky Way, that is. Both of them are going to face their Prima Guardian alone without all that alliance bullshit, though."

"That's what I would expect of Valhal, but do remember that the Court is not a crazy war cult but a murderous assassination cult," Maria said with a smile. "I don't have any special orders from Gwyndyr or my crazy flame-obsessed mercenary cult, so I guess I'll just go wherever. Actually, probably just gonna do what Miranda asks of me."

The three of them continued talking a bit before more people joined them to discuss the plans for this whole Alliance business, helped along by Vesperia walking over.

"If I may," Vesperia said, looking at Jake. "If this Ell'Hakan has already managed to claim another planet before we have a chance to step in, what are our plans?"

"First of all, I think getting access to a planet at all will require the permission of the World Leader. That would just make sense. So, chances are we wouldn't even be able to help, at least not for now, if they don't allow us to travel there," Jake said. "Secondly, I'm not sure how I feel about you taking over an entire planet filled with enlightened species."

Vesperia smiled. "Sire read my intentions that easily?"

"It makes sense," Jake shrugged. If there was a planet that was relatively weak, he understood why Vesperia would consider taking it over. She wanted somewhere to start a new hive, and she couldn't

place a proper one on Earth. Such hives tended to monopolize all the resources on a planet if allowed to grow freely, and Vesperia wanted somewhere she could have a Hive Queen go full throttle without clashing with Jake or people he knew.

“So, what if a planet that we have both access to and has the right circumstances?” Vesperia followed up.

“I’m not going to tell you what you can and can’t do if it doesn’t involve me,” Jake just said.

He wasn’t an idiot. He knew Vesperia would one day take over a whole bunch of planets as she grew. It was simply her Path to expand and, in many ways, also her responsibility. She hadn’t stated it outright, but Jake knew she felt like she had to create a strong foothold in the ninety-third universe for the Endless Empire.

As the only True Royal capable of being there, she was indisputably the highest-ranked ectognamorph of the entire universe. Jake could understand why she felt a need to do well, and part of doing well meant taking over a few planets plentiful with resources. These planets tended to naturally also have other life, enlightened races included, and their fates wouldn’t be pleasant, as they were viewed as nothing more but a vector of growth.

Either way, Vesperia seemed happy enough with his answer, as they gladly changed the subject that no one within the giant space worm seemed particularly comfortable with. Besides the Fallen King, that is. The Unique Lifeform honestly wasn’t really engaging with a lot of people and only talking with the Sword Saint and Sylphie.

He did speak up a bit when he infused them all with Golden Marks to allow communication and location-tracking on all of them. It was really handy soul magic, for sure.

Like this, the hours of travel quickly passed within the giant space worm, and soon enough, they reached their destination.

“Alright, we’ve reached our final stop, everyone out! Sandy’s voice echoed as, all at once, they were forcibly expelled from within the worm’s stomach. “Sorry, wanted to be nicer about it, but this place feels super weird and wrong and I want out of here sooner rather than later.”

Jake, who had landed on the sand dunes, looked at the worm with understanding. "Yeah... I also feel something. This is definitely the right spot. Do get out of here; we don't wanna risk the Prima Guardian doing some weird shit to you."

"No need to tell me twice!" Sandy said as the worm shimmered and flew away at breakneck speed.

"Do you think the worm will go too far away?" Carmen asked. "Kind of assumed that was also our ride home."

"Eh, one thing at a time; let's kill the boss before considering our transportation home," Jake shook his head.

Not far away from them, Jake also spotted Jacob and Bertram standing there. He and the rest of the strike team wanted over, as all the others who had arrived alongside them spread out to do their own pre-planned tasks.

"Soon," Jacob said when Jake got close. "It'll be right around there."

Jacob pointed to an inconspicuous area, but Jake didn't doubt his words. And not just because he was an Augur, but because of what Jake both saw and felt himself. A Pulse of Perception also confirmed the area was odd.

He barely spotted any life anywhere. Outside of the many humans and other races who had arrived, that is. All the wildlife had abandoned the area, even those very deep underground. Jake also didn't believe this was simply due to the many humans in the area.

Minutes ticked by, as the time grew ever-nearer, until finally... a system notification.

Time grows near, and the Prima Guardian shall arrive on Earth within 1 hour (59:59). All denizens of Earth innately feel where this danger shall appear from.

And just as the system said, they all knew where the boss would touch down, and yep.

It was right in front of them.