

Hunter 621

Chapter 621 - The Great Lineage Wall

Vesperia stared at Meira, Meira stared at both Jake and Vesperia as she shifted between them, and Jake tried to look at neither, feeling awkward as fuck. He considered asking for Villy to beam him up and allow him to escape. Or, at the very least, for someone to please cut the building tension.

"If you were asking if Jake succeeded in the ritual outside, then yes. As the result of the aforementioned ritual, I am pleased to meet you, miss?" Vesperia asked gracefully as she stood up to greet Meira.

"M... Meira," the elf said and bowed awkwardly, looking shell-shocked. Jake was pleasantly surprised at the Hive Queen taking the lead as Meira got stuck on a minor detail he had not seen coming.

"You are calling Lord Thayne by his name?" she asked, her voice a mix between puzzlement and... second-hand offense?

"That is what was asked of me, and I simply follow the wishes of my sire. Ah, where are my manners? I am Vesperia, True Royal of the Vespernat Lineage. It is a pleasure to meet you, Meira. Are you also a resident here?" Vesperia asked courteously.

"I am," Meira said with a nod, her eyes holding some level of hostility.

Vesperia clearly noticed this and looked toward Jake before shifting back to Meira and smiling while shaking her head. She looked at Meira, staring into her eyes for a moment before Meira's face turned red as a tomato. "I... I gotta go!"

Jake did not have time to say anything as Meira rushed out of the living room, straight towards her own residency. He stared after her before shifting his attention to Vesperia. Without him needing to say a word, she had "fixed" the awkwardness and made Meira leave... but...

"What did you say to her?"

She had clearly told Meira something telepathically; he was sure of it.

"I simply dispelled her fears. The girl is clearly interested in having you as her mate, and I informed her that I am no obstacle to her desires," Vesperia explained in a matter-of-fact tone.

Yeah, that should do it, Jake thought, considering her embarrassment as she left. It did feel awkward that it was so obvious even to others.

"Ah, but do not take offense that I don't consider you a potential partner. As my sire, it simply wouldn't be proper, and the result would likely be less than ideal as I have already inherited many of your Records, and our offspring could display negative traits akin to the children of incestuous relationships between humans," she once more explained, her voice calm, as if she was talking about a totally normal subject.

However, her words were honestly a huge relief, as Jake just feared he had made a potentially literal honeytrap in the form of the Wasp Queen. She also honestly seemed like a scary-as-hell opponent if she decided he would be an ideal partner. He could only shudder at the thought.

"Good to know," Jake said with relief. "If it is worth anything, then I also find it preferable for that not to be a thing. Better stay friends."

Vesperia nodded before thinking for a bit. "Don't misunderstand. I am sure other Hive Queens would find you a more than a suitable partner; it is just that you are my sire. Having experienced your Records first-hand, I would happily recommend you to other Queens if you are interested?"

"Please don't," Jake shut her down.

"Very well," the Hive Queen did not argue or even ask for an explanation.

Jake and Vesperia stayed in the living room a bit longer and finished their tea. The atmosphere was surprisingly not awkward despite the topics, Vesperia being incredibly good at keeping the conversation rolling. The Hive Queen asked some questions about the Order and the world as a whole, showing she had a lot of odd gaps in knowledge here and there. Jake also got a lot of questions in for the Queen, most of them just him showing interest in what exactly she was capable of.

He learned that even if the Bee Container was destroyed, it truly wasn't a problem. Vesperia could not have used it anyway, though she did need a new home if she wanted to start a hive somewhere. Until then, he learned she had some kind of internal world capable of housing her own spawns, eggs included.

When it came to eggs, she could apparently produce a bloody shitload dependent on the quality. She had an entire system that Jake could only compare to the city management system Miranda had told him about. Along with that, she had a special resource outside of stamina, health points, and mana that dictated how many spawns she could have at once.

It sounded almost like a population system from a real-time strategy game before the system. The more powerful the spawn, the more upkeep it took, and the weaker barely took any. This entire system was something all Hive Queens had, but the True Royals apparently had an even more elaborate and expanded system than others, and the better your variant, the better your Hive Queen System.

He also came to learn how fucking scary Hive Queens could be. One of the issues someone like Jake had was that he, in the end, was just one guy. Until he learned how to clone himself, he could only be in one place at once, and even then, having avatars was limiting.

Hive Queens did not have that problem. Vesperia alone could create thousands of weak C-grades, even at her current level, with some more powerful variants among them. These spawns were treated more like summons than actual children, and losing them only meant a bit of wasted energy and Vesperia having to spend time respawning them.

None of these spawns could gain levels on their own, had limited intelligence, and were, as Jake had estimated with the Isoptera Warriors, not real living creatures. They did not have Truesouls like Jake or the Hive Queen. They did have souls, but it was more just imitations of Truesouls that allowed them to live and still grant a limited amount of experience.

The only true children a Hive Queen could ever have were more Hive Queens. There were very few exceptions to this, and the Vespernat Hive Queens was not one such exception. Jake did also come to learn that Vesperia did not need a mate to birth another Hive Queen, but it was merely an option. As if the mate was an optional ingredient to potentially empower it.

Hive Queens had far more skills related to breeding than nearly any other race in the multiverse – if not every other race. A male companion could assist in the breeding process, effectively donating Records that the Queen could then use to create more powerful offspring, potentially even more powerful variants. This was how a hive could grow above its current rank outside of the existing highest-ranked Queen managing to evolve to a better variant herself.

For Vesperia, the issue was that the companion had to possess equal or superior Records, or it would end up just resulting in worse offspring. This was because the Records of a "lesser creature" – Vesperia's words, not Jake's – would only end up polluting the Records of the newly born Queen. So, her bar for any potential was set high as fuck from the get-go.

This was an issue for all True Royals, and why Vesperia had been genuine when she offered to introduce Jake to other Hive Queen True Royals. She emphasized how much he would benefit a hive, and when Jake mentioned the Isoptera Hive Queen, she only nodded, viewing it as a reasonable course of action to try and have him stay there. If a naive one. The companion had to be willing, after all, or things wouldn't work with how the system operated. Forceful breeding was not a thing – though coercion and bribery were very much tactics deployed.

"Not that I believe coercion or bribery would work on you, and the issue is that most individuals who are worthy companions for True Royals are all talented and strong-willed individuals with powerful backings, making underhanded tactics ill-advised," Vesperia explained. "Though the Endless Empire does not lack suitable mates in general. Males there who are good breeding partners are highly valued and nurtured."

Jake smirked. "Would I be wrong to assume the powerful Hive Queens over there got harems?"

"Harem? A concept I am not quite familiar with," Vesperia tilted her head.

"Eh, it means when a man or woman has an entourage of partners around them, often all of them of the romantic kind," Jake tried to explain, not entirely sure of the definition himself.

"Not quite. There is little romance, though some Queens do take a preferred mate for life, but this is far from the norm. Diversity in Records is highly valued, and one male can assist several Hive Queens

without any issues, but each Hive Queen will also want many different males. Efficiency is often the primary motive, not emotions. The good of the hive is the most important factor. Always," Vesperia clarified.

"Sounds like the Endless Empire is a place to avoid," Jake muttered, primarily to himself.

Vesperia simply nodded, not trying to convince him of anything. Kind of refreshing.

"Say, I have been wondering. Most Hive Queens I have met so far haven't exactly been good at combat but spawn powerful guardians. How does it work for you? In my experience, wasps aren't exactly peaceful creatures, but Queens also aren't fighters," Jake asked.

"Most Hive Queens need to fully specialize. That is the only way they can still fulfill their purpose without ending up subpar, as they simply lack the Records to be more than be the mothers of their hives. While I am capable of spawning powerful guardians, please do not think that a True Royal is defenseless," Vesperia said, her voice not quite angry but still severe.

"Your aura is powerful, yes, but you do not strike me as particularly dangerous right now," Jake said, seeing no need to hide thoughts. His danger sense and ability to evaluate others was something he was quite proud of, and he was certain the current Hive Queen was not a danger to him. But he also felt like she was hiding something.

Vesperia didn't seem that offended as she shook her head.

"An understandable concern, and not entirely inaccurate initial assessment, but ultimately incorrect. The part you got right is that I am indeed not much of a fighter as I am right now. This form is made for

reproduction and to fulfill my duties as a Queen and not for combat. I am capable of displaying potent nature magic, and I do have certain specialties you may find interesting, including skills you desired from a Pollendust Bee Queen. One of the things my Lineage specializes in is not only gathering resources for the hive but cultivating it ourselves. But for the hive to not lose these carefully cultivated resources, you naturally need to be able to protect yourself. As a True Royal, I am meant to be the impetus of my entire Lineage, both mother and defender,” she said with a smile. “I believe it will be easier with a practical demonstration.”

Jake saw her smile and nodded, wanting to see what she had to show him.

“Follow me outside if you would,” Vesperia said as she stood up. “Let me show you why the Vespernat name is not for naught.”

Jake raised an eyebrow and smiled. Wouldn’t be a wasp if she couldn’t ruin someone’s day.

The energy was dense in the massive chamber as the S-grade Warrior Queen meditated, fulfilling her duty as Watcher. Occasionally – a few times a day – the Great Lineage Wall would stir, and one of the millions of bricks would light up. Each time it happened, she would note it down for her millennial report. It used to only be every millennium anyway, but with the integration, it had been moved up as the Lineage Wall was far more active than usual.

The Great Lineage Wall had been brought there by her ancestors and maintained by the most powerful gods of the Endless Empire ever since. It was a special item granted by the system and had a singular function: inform of whenever a new Queen of one of the stored Lineages was born outside of the territory of the Endless Empire. The further up the wall, the higher the level of the Lineage. Most bricks that lit up were in the lower parts, with rare ones in the middle. To see one light up in the upper parts was considered very rare, and it only happened about once every month. At the very top of the wall were the battlements. Each battlement was a giant block, and there were only about five hundred of these.

Sitting on top of the Great Lineage Wall were the hundred towers. At least there used to be a hundred. Now, only sixty-one of the towers remained, the rest only having their base remaining. The last time a tower crumbled had been in the eighty-sixth era when the Automata Legion had invaded one of the Great Plains and managed to slay the last remaining True Royal of the Lineage. For that is what the towers represented: the True Royals of the ectognamorph race.

Suddenly, the Warrior Queen was awakened as a loud humming resounded through the massive chamber. With surprise and glee, she saw one of the battlements light up with power, displaying a rune. A Queen had been born among the quasi-Royal Paracidclaws, something the Warrior Queen quickly noted down on her report. It was a wonderful occasion, and-

Her thoughts were stopped as the entire chamber rumbled, making the Warrior Queen ready herself. Power surged out of her, searching her surroundings as she feared someone had managed to invade the Empire's heartlands, but she quickly realized the cause.

The Great Lineage Wall was shaking. The Warrior Queen had been assigned Watcher for nearly a hundred thousand years now and had never seen anything like this. She quickly took out a token, but she didn't have time to inject any energy as a presence washed over her, making her fall to her knees. Then, several more presences appeared, none of them even sparring her a thought.

Royal... gods...

Eight gods had appeared in the chamber, all staring at the wall.

None of them spoke as they simply looked at it. The Warrior Queen spied confusion and frowns on their faces, making her fear something was horribly wrong. Something was happening. Something even the mightiest True Royals did not understand.

Then, the entire wall stirred.

Every single tower flashed with energy for a fraction of a moment as something the Warrior Queen thought impossible happened. A crumbled tower began vibrating, the stones remaining all cracking as the base turned to rubble... only for it to look as if time began rewinding. Bricks appeared from nothingness, the entire thing building itself in seconds as suddenly a new tower had risen from the rubble.

The new tower lit up with an intense light as the Royal Gods all had a shift of mood. Smiles appeared on their lips in unison.

"Rejoice, as a True Royal has reemerged in the multiverse. The system itself has smiled upon us," the central god spoke. The Warrior Queen also felt confused as she stared up at the tower in awe. New True Royals could not be born... not unless the system itself blessed an ectognamorph with something allowing it to evolve or be born as one.

"Which Lineage is she from?"

"It was before my time... one of the older ones."

"Mine too; I do not recognize it."

"It is the Vespernat Lineage; they died out during the first era. Where is this True Royal?"

The question was asked of one of the Hive Queens with an eye on her forehead.

"I cannot see; she is obscured... hidden. By something or someone powerful," the three-eyed Hive Queen answered.

"Is she related to the new universe?"

"She is... and yet she is not," the three-eyed Queen answered, shaking her head. "But I feel the True Royal is not there right now. She is hidden not by the system but by a powerful entity. Potentially a Primordial or one of the major factions, though I see little reason for most to hide her away, much less know she would be born. Something is different from all other reappearances of True Royals we have seen before."

"I see. We shall proceed with caution, then," the central Queen said as she turned her attention to the kneeling S-grade Warrior Queen.

"Heed my words, young one. Henceforth you are relieved of your duty as Watcher and is to join my sister in locating the True Royal," the central Queen said, referring to the three-eyed Queen.

"As is your will," the Warrior Queen said, honored. "What does her majesty wish for me to do upon locating the True Royal?"

The leader of the Royal Council smiled as she stared at the newly reassembled tower.

"Bring our new sister home."

Chapter 622 - Vespernat Metamorphosis

The human and Hive Queen walked out of the mansion and onto the grass lawn outside. Vesperia spoke as they walked, explaining some more things.

"The Hive Queen form is designed to appeal to as many of the higher-tier races in the multiverse as possible in order to optimize our ability to find mates, and like other monsters, we do possess the polymorph skill to further alter ourselves. The lower the level of a Hive Queen variant, the less humanoid its default form tends to become, which is why the Isoptera Hive Queen you encountered was not fully capable of creating a human form quite yet. However, there is one issue with this approach: the human form is far from ideal when it comes to combat," Vesperia explained. She looked at Jake for a brief moment before further clarifying.

"From the perspective of a creature classified as a monster, that is. We cannot wear equipment, we cannot truly use any weapons – though some specialized tools do exist – and we have limited skills when it comes to making use of the advantages of the human form. For other Hive Queens, this innate weakness of their form is something that is inevitable. Even their full monster forms are not ideal for combat, so they rely solely on spawning powerful defenders and using the hive as their protective shield. However, we, as True Royals, are different. We are not just the mothers of our hives but the last line of defense."

Vesperia took a stance a bit of distance away from Jake as her aura began to change. It retracted into her body, making her seem entirely powerless for a moment before she spoke.

"Vespernat Metamorphosis."

A bright light resembling the shape of a pupa appeared, and Jake felt it served as both a protective barrier as well as a way to hide the transformation. Not that it worked against Jake's sphere and insane Perception as he saw her change.

Vesperia's humanoid legs extended, becoming thinner and far more insect-like with jagged blade-like growths all over them, both looking almost like they were made of bone with sharp spear-like ends. Her skin transformed as it was replaced by plates of yellow and black chitin. Both arms transformed as the right one changed into looking like a long lance-like stinger, the left one changing to still be vaguely humanoid but with claws rather than fingertips, and a large piece of chitin grew on her forearm, resembling a shield.

Exoskeleton covered her entire body, even a helmet-like growth covering her head, leaving not even a slit for a visor, but instead had black circular coverings on each side one could faintly peer through, making her look quite a bit more wasp-like. Her four wings remained but had grown larger than before to match her increased bulk. The wings were covered in some pollen-like substance that gave off a powerful life affinity, but in general, her body did not give off much magical energy. Jake was confident... she was not a caster of any kind but a pure warrior type.

The pupa shattered in the very next moment, releasing a blast of energy as her full form was revealed to his eyes.

Vesperia had gone from a tall woman with soft features to a creature clearly designed purely for combat. Not a single natural opening remained, not a single identifiable weak point visible. The only slight giveaway that she was even a female Hive Queen was her thin frame and long golden hair flowing out of the helmet, but with even the chest region not having any outgrowth, showing her otherwise oversized mounds were no more. It could just be a thin long-haired dude.

Her new exoskeleton honestly looked like full plate armor, and Jake knew just by looking at it that it was insanely resilient. However, out of everything, the thing that made the biggest impression was the massive stinger-like right arm.

It made her look like a knight with a giant lance, except the lance was a deadly stinger dripping with potent venom. With her shield-like growth, she truly did look like a knight. A wasp knight.

"How long can you sustain that form?" Jake asked with interest, admiring the transformation.

"Perpetually. It is not a boosting skill but merely a transformation between two natural states," Vesperia answered, her voice clear despite her head being covered by the helmet.

Jake nodded, inspecting her form more. The black pattern on the yellow armor did make her kind of resemble a wasp, but it was actually more like she wore some kind of... eh, mecha-suit, maybe? Not quite, but close.

"... so what do you think?" she asked after several more seconds passed. Her tone caught Jake off guard, as it seemed off compared to her usual speech pattern.

Is she... fishing for approval?

The thought seemed preposterous, but maybe?

"It looks powerful and resilient, and your presence is a lot more intimidating, but what ultimately matters is not how it looks but its effects on your fighting prowess," Jake said honestly. "Care to demonstrate?"

"Naturally," Vesperia nodded as he saw her wings vibrate. Her entire form disappeared as she flew into the air with impressive speed, the armor obviously not slowing her down. Vesperia made dozens of stabbing motions, every single stab releasing a shockwave with impressive control. He used the word control rather than potency because what was made was more a penetrating shockwave than a big and powerful one, as thin as a bullet and far deadlier.

Jake smiled as he summoned his wings, a long enough time having passed since he used the escape skill from the hive back on Earth. With a leap, he also shot into the air, Vesperia stopping her movements. She looked at him, unsure.

"Come at me," Jake said.

Vesperia looked for a moment before nodding. "Very well."

Without any hesitation, she charged. However, Jake could only scoff. He side-stepped the stinger that hadn't even aimed for a lethal spot, and before Vesperia had a chance to react, punched her in the chest, sending her flying backward.

Good thing I had the glove enchant, Jake thought as he landed the punch, feeling the feedback as he hit the armor. It was not quite as strong as the Hive King... but it was far closer than he would have expected from someone over seventy levels lower than the termite had been.

"Be serious," Jake said as Vesperia had easily stabilized herself. "Come at me properly and show me what you got. Don't be afraid of hurting me. If you were capable of killing me, I would have died a long time ago."

Arrogant but honest. Vesperia also seemed to realize he was serious, and he felt her also shift gear. Intense life affinity mana revolved around her for a moment as she charged once more, this time far faster. He estimated some kind of boosting skill had been activated.

Jake still side-stepped it, but he didn't have time to counterattack as the shield came, aimed for his skull. He raised his foot and kicked off it, sending himself backward, as Vesperia stabbed towards his retreating figure. He was out of range from the physical blow, but a shockwave hit him in the stomach, punching a small centimeter-wide hole into him as if he had just been hit by a bullet.

He then felt something more. Palate of the Malefic Viper went into full swing as his eyes opened wide. They weren't just shockwaves. A small needle-like stinger had also been released, one that had been perfectly hidden by the shockwave so that even Jake had missed it.

Pleased but a bit miffed at his Perception failing him, he went on the offensive. Both katars appeared as Jake teleported behind Vesperia, aiming for her wings. She reacted instantly, whipping around to defend herself as Jake teleported again, only for her to stab where he had just teleported to, forcing Jake to retreat back to avoid another stinger in his stomach.

Omnidirectional vision? Jake questioned. The eyes on the helmet were clearly not for show...

Vesperia followed up and tried to press her advantage with a charge. Once more, she tried to use the large stinger, but just as Jake was about to be disappointed by her lack of diversity, a weapon he had forgotten about shot toward him.

The long spear-like legs were not for show.

She kicked upwards, the leg cutting through the air like a blade. Jake barely managed to dodge as the other leg kicked, releasing a crescent wave of energy outwards, forcing Jake to block using both weapons. Just as he staved off the wave, the stinger came again, pushing him back even further.

Jake got repeatedly pushed back as he faced the Wasp Queen's assault. Her entire body was a weapon, every movement deadly and purposeful. In his opinion, she sure didn't fight like someone who wasn't even born yesterday. In fact, she pressured Jake hard enough for him to struggle to find openings. Her way of fighting was almost like a dance, utilizing all her natural weapons in fluid combos that Jake did not doubt would crush most opponents.

He felt her pick up the pace as she pushed herself. Jake's windows to dodge got narrower and narrower, Vesperia overflowing with life as her body boiled with energy beneath her armor. He only managed to use his weapons to deflect blows at this point, the pressure mounting even if it was still manageable.

But suddenly, as he was about to dodge, he felt odd. His movement was slightly slower than it should have been, resulting in Vesperia's leg leaving a gash on his forearm. He managed to block the follow-ups until he once more was too slow, resulting in a far worse outcome.

Jake was forced to raise both weapons to try and block, but the lance-like stinger skirted off his blades and managed to stab him in the shoulder before he could launch himself backward. As he was stabbed, he felt the venom invade his body, which was also when he fully realized what had made him slower before.

He had believed Palate of the Malefic Viper would handle the venom from the small stinger before, but that had clearly not been the case. It was worse than Palate not handling it... Vesperia made him think it had handled it, as she had controlled the venom and only activated it at crucial moments.

Neurotoxin, Jake concluded.

The toxin spread throughout his body, slowing him down. Vesperia was already showing speed and power superior to Jake, and now she had a clear advantage. The Wasp Queen knew this, too, as she pressed forward. Jake looked at her charge as he knew he wouldn't be able to dodge the incoming assault in his current state.

In conclusion, Vesperia was stronger than Jake in her combat form. Right now, at least.

However, there was one stark difference between the two. Vesperia had activated a boosting skill... Jake had not.

An explosion of energy was released from his body as Arcane Awakening activated, boosting all his stats by 30%. His sudden boost took Vesperia by surprise as he slipped by her stinger, punching both katars into her chest at the same time. The resulting explosion launched her back, Eternal Hunger failing to penetrate the armor with the Blackpoint Nanoblade, leaving a small hole. It did not reach flesh, but it was close.

Vesperia took caution, and he felt her glance at his katars as she retreated. Jake wondered what she was up to as suddenly the stinger began to change. The black patterns on it glowed as the end of the stinger opened up, leaving a small hole.

Wait.

She aimed it toward Jake as it flashed with energy.

That's a fucking gun.

A stinger the size of a pencil was blasted towards him, Jake barely dodging in time as he was still shocked. Another stinger came right after, with four more released within the next two seconds. He dodged them all as he took out his half-ruined bow and coated it in some stable arcane energy to keep it from breaking apart as he smiled.

Ranged battle it is.

The venom was still bothering him, but Palate was hard at work, and the rush of arcane energy had managed to dispel most of it already. Vesperia also noticed this as their ranged battle picked up the pace, the damn stinger apparently having several different modes.

Rapid fire, shotgun, railgun, and even a damn harpoon where a string stayed attached. The Hive Queen soon realized that facing Jake in ranged combat wasn't wise and resumed fighting in melee. Needless to say, then Jake found himself more pressed in melee, and Vesperia also had a bit more juice to squeeze out of her boosting skill as he felt her go full throttle.

Their fight continued for several more minutes. Jake even used Eternal Shadow as Vesperia also displayed some more skills while also willingly taking full advantage of her far more resilient defenses, gladly trading blows.

Jake's conclusion after fighting her for a good while was clear.

About as strong as me with Arcane Awakening at 30%.

Which made her stronger than Sylphie – or at least a lot more well-rounded - based on Jake's estimate, but still below someone like the Fallen King. He also had a feeling she wouldn't be able to measure up to the Sword Saint, but that one was hard to tell as Jake hadn't seen the full power of the old man for a while.

Though, to be fair, I am a bad matchup for her, Jake also concluded. Her venom was powerful as fuck; no two ways about it. He estimated the venom on her stinger was nearly on par with Scarlett's, though he was sure Scarlett had far more diverse toxins while Vesperia only used one kind. Sadly for her, Jake was a bit overpowered versus poison users.

Vesperia also clearly noticed she could not get any good advantage as she retreated and stopped her non-stop assault. Noticing her intent, Jake also stopped the fight.

"Gotta say, I am not disappointed," he smiled.

"Vespernat Metamorphosis."

Vesperia used the transformation skill again, changing to her old form. The moment the light faded, Jake saw her expression. She seemed... displeased.

"Have I overestimated my own power?" she asked, partly to Jake and partly to herself. "I felt helpless during most of that spar, nothing truly working, even when I managed to take you by surprise. Moreover, I always felt like you would have a response. Most frustrating was your ability to avoid my blows. You possess some kind of pre-cognition skill, do you not? How come none of my interference with your divination and the concept of time worked?"

Jake was surprised. "You messed with the concepts of time and divination?"

"Yes?" Vesperia asked, also confused. "General interference through the pollen I expelled from my wings. It should have created an environment where all magic, not of the life affinity, is hampered, though it did prove mostly useless against your magic as it mostly works on concepts, and the innate resilience of whatever affinity you are using is incredible."

"Huh," Jake commented. "Sorry to disappoint, but no divination or time magic going on with me, at least not in the traditional sense."

"Then how? How did you avoid all my blows as if you knew they were coming?" Vesperia asked, her frustration bubbling up a bit again.

Jake just grinned.

"Pure fucking instinct."

"That's ridic-"

"Don't mess with her too much," a voice suddenly echoed from the stairs leading up to the mansion's main building below.

"Finally letting yourself be known, huh?" Jake turned to look at the Primordial snake god below.

He had naturally seen Villy pop in far earlier before the fight even began, though he had chosen to stay hidden to not interfere. Would Jake really want to fight right in front of his mansion if he risked ruining his secondary home?

Vesperia also noticed him as she quickly flew down and bowed deeply. "I greet thee, Malefic One."

Villy surprised Jake as he nodded. "A pleasure."

He then looked up at Jake. "You should also get down here; we have some things to discuss."

"What's up?" Jake asked curiously.

The snake god smiled. "Oh, nothing big, except the Endless Empire has already begun to send feelers out to find out how the new True Royal from a long-dead Lineage has appeared and where she is, causing quite a ruckus all around. So, ya know, the expected outcome of your bullshit."

"Oh," Jake said, scratching his head as he flew down and landed.

"Yep, so I guess the three of us should have a little chat," Villy said to the human and Hive Queen.
"Because this shit is gonna leak whether we like it or not."

Chapter 623 - The Significance Of A True Royal

Villy didn't even give Jake and Vesperia a chance to respond as he teleported all three of them into the living room, where the tea set from before was still present. The god waved his hand and cleared it, only for it to be replaced with new tea – and cookies – right after.

"So, as always, Jake, you underestimate the impact of your actions while I purposefully don't make you aware of them before after the fact because I think it will lead to a more entertaining outcome," Villy started out saying. "And I will say that this time around, you truly have gone above and beyond. A Genesis Cosmic Worm and a Sylphian Hawk are both very interesting species, but they both have in common that they were not known, so they didn't really attract that much attention. A True Royal of the ectognamorph race, on the other hand, now that is something people will notice."

Jake wasn't quite sure what to say. He could complain about Villy spurring him on, but that would seem rude to Vesperia, and he had ultimately wanted to do the ritual himself.

"What are you getting at?" Jake asked.

"I assume the Lineage Knowledge you inherited already made you aware of the importance of your existence to the Endless Empire?" Villy asked Vesperia, ignoring Jake.

She nodded respectfully in response.

The snake god smirked. "Well, I will be nice and give Jake here a recap as he doesn't. You see, he has this tendency to do things because he can, not because he should. He rarely considers the consequences, even when made aware of the potential significance of what he is doing, and-"

"I think she gets it," Jake cut him off.

"That your Chosen displays such outstanding abilities and potential, even allowing him to do what was once thought impossible, is only a cause for celebration, is it not?" Vesperia also cut in, surprising Jake.

Her outburst seemed to surprise herself, too, as she quickly bowed.

"I apologize for my disrespect, Malefic One; I meant no offense," she said apologetically and slightly afraid. Jake put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

"It's fine," he said, looking at Villy. "Right?"

"Mm," the Viper just hummed, keeping his attention on Vesperia. "Interesting, isn't it? You should have noticed by now that something is absent, shouldn't you?"

"I... the presence of the Malefic One feels..." Vesperia also finally seemed to notice herself.

"Another peculiar trait of your sire. Any creature he has been involved in the evolution or creation of inherits this particular trait, effectively making them immune to the passive presences of gods. Be it because of the direct connection during the creation or the Records gained, who can tell?" Villy shook his head. "Ah, but there is one thing I have been meaning to test, and as his first creation I have come into direct contact with, you shall be the subject."

The atmosphere in the room suddenly changed as Jake felt everything distort in his vision. An almost tangible pressure fell upon the room, Jake feeling himself be suppressed for but a fraction of a second. Then, in the very next moment, he felt his own heartbeat as his own presence flared in defiance, dispelling the effect instantly and making his vision return to normal.

He was about to ask what Villy was doing when he felt the couch move slightly. Looking to his side, he saw Vesperia shaking, her eyes dilated, and blood running from her lips from biting down too hard. She seemed utterly incapable of moving, making Jake frown as he pushed his own presence outwards.

Jake felt how difficult it was, but he still managed to cover Vesperia, and just as he did, she stopped trembling. Her eyes were still wide, and it took her several seconds of labored breathing before she calmed down a little, making Jake throw Villy an angry look.

"What the hell, man?"

"Interesting, isn't it?" the god asked with a raised eyebrow. "I just fully flared my presence with the intent to suppress the two of you, and it worked just as intended. Except there is one stark difference. While the True Royal had resistance, the moment that resistance was overcome, she had nothing to fight back. As for you, you don't just have resistance but a presence of your own, able to make you pretty much immune unless someone can overcome it. Ah, but I must say even the resistance is impressive. The fact she didn't pass out immediately makes her innate resistance to presences surpass many gods."

Jake frowned, not entirely keen on the Viper's approach, even if he did understand what he did. "So the resistance makes us immune to passive auras, but when intent also gets involved, you need your own innate intent-infused presence to truly fight it off. Something only I have at this moment, but that others usually only get through just getting stronger."

"See, he isn't that ignorant despite how he usually comes off," Villy smiled, looking at Vesperia, who had calmed significantly.

"Rude," Jake commented.

The Viper just smiled and shook his head. "Back on topic. While the True Royal gets her wits back, let me give you a brief history of why what you did is such a big deal in a multiversal context. And can I just say it feels good to finally be able to give you a speech like this when it comes to your odd creature-creation extravaganza? This time I actually know why it matters, while the others had left me clueless. Anyway, do you have any idea what a True Royal is?"

Jake considered the vision of Records for a bit and gave it a shot with what he had put together. "A categorization of ectognamorphs spawned directly by the system at some point, with there being a hundred of them in total in the beginning."

Villy raised his eyebrows, and he also felt Vesperia beside him react. She stared at him weirdly as Villy just ended up shaking his head in disbelief.

"Some kind of Record vision? Must be. Either way, yes, you are correct, but don't share it casually again as the Endless Empire views this as quite the secret. The True Royals were a group of one hundred ectognamorphs, all born within a hidden realm during the first era, with this hidden realm now being the heartlands of their race. Each of them was born at C-grade, like the Vespernat Hive Queen here, and

rapidly grew in power before they made themselves known to the rest of the multiverse," Villy began explaining as he moved his hand to make some visual queues, showing a hundred humanoid figures.

"All of them were the Origin of a specific variant, though there was some overlap. Ectognamorphs resembling ants, as an example, have several True Royals among them, and one True Royal of a particular variant does have some faint overlap with similar ones that allows them to also exert pressure against their less royal cousins. The same is true for Vesperia here, who is also partly related to ants, though it is weak and not worth much."

"The Endless Empire still has True Royals from the ant Lineage even now, so my royalty towards these ants is mostly meaningless," Vesperia added, looking back on top and not offended by what Villy had done earlier in the slightest.

"True," Villy nodded. "But as I said, then the connection is weak... both ways. This will become relevant later as to why a Vespernat being born is so important in their eyes. For now, back to history."

The Viper made a motion of his finger as two of the hundred figures disappeared.

"Even for a True Royal, the Path to power is filled with danger. Two of them died without leaving any spawns capable of becoming True Royals themselves being born, ultimately resulting in only ninety-eight reaching S-grade during this era. No True Royal reached godhood before the second era."

Jake frowned. "With their talent..."

"Becoming a god was still not attainable," Villy shook his head. "Plus, their method of reproduction to spawn more True Royals is far from ideal. Vesperia, if you would?"

The True Royal nodded. "Spawning another True Royal is incredibly difficult and near-impossible in nearly all cases. Plus, the Path is severed if the last True Royal of a particular variant dies. This is because a True Royal can only appear in one of two ways. Well... outside of the system or you getting directly involved and circumventing these rules, that is."

Jake took that as a compliment.

"The first method is through regular breeding. When a True Royal has a child with a powerful enough partner, they will spawn what is known as a Quasi-Royal. Quasi-Royals can also spawn naturally if a Hive Queen is particularly talented, though those of a severed Path will never be able to become True Royals themselves, as intersecting with the Records of the connected True Royal is a requirement. In other words, they will have to meet the True Royal themselves or be given something by a still-living True Royal. Many True Royals send out treasures into the multiverse to try and allow Quasi-Royals to be born and potentially even help them on their Path to true royalty. They naturally also do this to try and recruit more members for the Endless Empire."

"And the second method?" Jake asked.

"Due to the importance a True Royal holds for their Lineage, there are ways to ensure one is born. We all hold a skill allowing us to effectively rebirth ourselves at the cost of our own lives by creating an egg of a True Royal. Naturally, this can only be done once, and the egg will spawn at the beginning of whatever grade the True Royal was. Moreover, this egg will never hatch naturally but will need intensive nurturing from the hive and, dependent on the grade, everything from a few years in C-grade to a thousand in S-grade before it will hatch. Do also note that this is not truly a rebirth as a new individual will spawn, though we can leave a message through the Lineage Knowledge," Vesperia explained.

"And there you have it," Villy explained. "True Royals are all pinnacle creatures, sometimes even compared to Unique Lifeforms due to their innate power, but this also means they suffer from a lot of

rules and restrictions. The Endless Empire has done many things to overcome these restrictions throughout the ages, and the one thing they did that proved most effective was to team up and create said Empire, allowing their hives to work together in times of conflict... and conflict they have faced. Tell me, Jake, what do you know of the Automata Legion?"

Jake saw Vesperia flinch at the mention as she grasped her dress and had a murderous look. "Not much, besides being the faction of the Primordial known as Rigoria the Maker."

"Well, that is all you need to know for now. That, and the fact that ever since the first era, the Endless Empire has been their mortal enemy, and Rigoria has tried to exterminate the entire ectognamorph race from the face of the multiverse with not a single era of peace," the Viper explained as the ninety-eight summoned figures began disappearing one by one, indicating the deaths of True Royal Lineages.

"Rigoria would be angry with me for saying this, but the Automata and the eusocial ectognamorphs are very similar. Both need endless expansions to consume resources, and both work as collectives. These days, I would say the Endless Empire has the edge in their war, but back in the first era, things were quite different. Rigoria was a god, and while she couldn't move much around due to the nature of her being, she could very much spawn armies, including her own avatars. Avatars with the powers of a god," the Viper said, Jake, seeing twenty-six of the figures disappear, meaning only seventy-two remained. Which he found odd.

"Not to be offensive... but how the hell did Rigoria fail to wipe them out? One side had a god, the other didn't," Jake asked.

"I told you, True Royals are monsters. Rigoria is a Primordial, yes, making her a powerful as fuck god, but even she failed to invade the heartlands of the Endless Empire more than a handful of times, and every time she tried, dozens of peak S-grade True Royals would face her. Individually, Rigoria was, of course, superior, but when outnumbered, she would eventually lose out, and her avatar be destroyed. However, there was still a huge gap in power, and the True Royals did begin to fall one by one. The war effort also meant that many regular ectognamorphs died by the billions every single day, and the variants at the vanguard were those made for combat. Such as the wasps led by their Vespernat Hive Queen. As part of

the vanguard, it should not come as a surprise she died despite her combat power being ranked top five of all True Royals,” the snake god gave Jake a history lesson. “Things stabilized a lot after that as some True Royals managed to reach godhood, but the war is still ongoing to this day, having only grown in scope.”

Damn, Jake thought, noting one particular thing. Top five, you go, Vesperia!

“Now, let’s get down to the crux of now that you have some context. Do you know why True Royals are so important to the Endless Empire?” Villy asked

“They are powerful and can help lead their race?” Jake guessed

“Technically true, but not the entire story. The Endless Empire does include all variants of ectognamorphs; some are not part of the faction at all. One of those types of variants is the vast majority of wasps and bees spread throughout the multiverse. The largest hives perhaps still maintain working relationships with the Endless Empire, but they don’t join it. Can you guess why?” the Viper asked leadingly.

“Pride and nature?” Jake assumed. “True Royals would not want to give a non-True Royal the proper respect, and a leader of a hive that isn’t respected will not recognize them as their leaders due to their nature as Hive Queens not recognizing them as their True Royals. From what I gathered, they are all hive-first, so why would a Wasp Hive Queen make sacrifices for the Endless Empire due to orders from some foreign True Royal?”

“Right on the money. The reason why True Royals are so important is that they are respected innately. A Quasi-Royal wasp will not recognize a True Royal ant Hive Queen as superior to themselves, but at most as an equal despite their status as cousins. But if a True Royal wasp was to appear... even a Godqueen

Quasi-Royal Wasp or Bee Hive Queen would follow them unquestionably. It is simply how their race works, a fundamental law of their state of being,” Villy explained.

Vesperia nodded in confirmation, making Jake frown as he was beginning to get the picture. However, it only truly sank in with the next part.

”Throughout the history of the multiverse, severed Lineages have only reappeared thrice, and every time due to some Hive Queen getting its hands on an item granted by the system directly, allowing it to become a True Royal,” Villy said with a smile. ”Oh, and now the fourth time is from you doing some fun-time experimenting while barely in C-grade. But tell me, Jake, what do you think the Endless Empire did the first three times? What lengths do you think they are willing to go to? How much value does Vesperia’s existence truly hold to them?”

Jake stared at the ground as he processed things. He now truly got it. He had kind of assumed that the Endless Empire wanted Vesperia because of historical reasons and maybe due to some odd sense of pride... but it was far more than that. Vesperia had mentioned she would be recognized as a leader of wasps and bees, but Jake had not thought it was so... universal and absolute.

For the Endless Empire, recruiting Vesperia was not a matter of gaining a powerful C-grade that could potentially reach godhood in the future and allow a new Lineage to reemerge:

She was a direct way to recruit every single hive of bees and wasps in the entire multiverse into the Endless Empire and expand their power significantly.

Chapter 624 - A Long Overdue Decision

Jake, by now, realized: he had fucked up. At least he felt like he had fucked up. But upon looking at Vesperia sitting beside him, calmly drinking her tea while Villy explained, he couldn’t say he regretted what he had done. Despite only meeting that day, he liked Vesperia. Who couldn’t like someone with a damn stinger gun?

"This is... kind of bad, isn't it?" he finally asked, making Vesperia look at him confused.

"Why would it be bad that you managed to sire a True Royal? The Endless Empire, no, any faction would welcome you with open arms, and no one will dare attempt to kill you for fear of the Malefic One choosing to strike back. That is not even mentioning the many other factions who will also desire your protection and growth," Vesperia asked.

"Yeah... the thing is, I am not really public with this entire Chosen of the Malefic Viper thing," Jake scratched his head.

Vesperia looked at him weirdly for a few seconds. "I... don't understand?"

"Jake here is weird; we agree on that, right?" Villy asked Vesperia with a grin. The True Royal nodded, Jake, choosing not to take offense as she clearly just agreed with the god to be nice and because he was a Primordial. Right?

"Well, part of his weirdness is a constant fear of recognition and having people suck up to him. I do kind of get it, as having armies of annoying insects running after you constantly is less than ideal, and it is made worse for Jake by his preference for people to treat him like a person rather than a symbol," the snake god explained.

Jake confirmed with a nod. "Can you blame me for just wanting normal interactions with other people and not them constantly walking on eggshells or treating me like royalty?"

Vesperia now looked even more confused. "But... you are, aren't you? You have helped birth a True Royal, and I recognize you as my sire and parent. You are a being above nearly all others."

"Not disagreeing that I am awesome, just that I don't want to be treated based solely on some perceived status people think I have. The problem is that others don't seem to be able to respect that I want to be treated like a person and not some semi-divine figure based on their preconceived notions of who and what I should be," Jake tried to explain.

The True Royal nodded, though Jake had a feeling she didn't quite get it. Which was kind of fair. As a True Royal, it was innate of her to be treated like royalty by others; it was simply how things were supposed to be.

"Anyway, let's get back on topic," Villy cut in. "My point here is that hiding what you have done is... not possible. While I am also awesome, and while Shroud of the Primordial can block nearly all things, there are gods out there capable of piercing through it. I know of at least one of the leaders in the Royal Council that would be able to trace you if she ever examined Vesperia here, and no amount of cloaking on my end can stop that. It will make her unable to find you, but she will know who you are. Ultimately, Shroud of the Primordial is about hiding things about you, not the fact that you even exist."

"The Odonstrom Hive Queen," Vesperia nodded.

"Dragonfly True Royal, leading the Odonata Lineage," Villy clarified for Jake. "They are Perception-focused, so you may like them, and their senses are wicked. The True Royal has a compound eye on her forehead, able to see things not perceivable to nearly any other visual organ I know of. Karmic threads, mana, emotions... she is even able to view different fragments of time through her eye, observing both past and future. A real scary one."

"Hm," Jake said with a frown. He had to admit, he had kind of banked on Shroud of the Primordial being perfect... but he had clearly miscalculated on that one. However, there was also one other issue.

"Wait, does that mean she already located Vesperia?" Jake asked, not sure if he should be worried or not.

"No," the Viper shook his head. "We are still on my turf, and while in the Order, I can hide her. However, the problem is that they will instantly know her location and descend when she is not covered by the formations here. Of course, it is not even certain that is an issue. Is it?"

He asked the last part to Vesperia, who in turn looked at Jake for an answer.

"Don't look at me," Jake said, putting up his hands. "You aren't some prisoner here, Vesperia. If you want to stay, I am fine with it, but from what I have gathered, you are already pretty damn connected to the Endless Empire."

Vesperia seemed to consider his words but then turned to the Viper. "May I ask what the intentions of the Malefic One are?"

"I have none," Villy shook his head. "And if I did, this still wouldn't be my decision to make, but Jake's. If you haven't noticed, then we don't have a traditional Chosen-Patron relationship. I don't tell him what to do; I just enjoy his antics. Sometimes I even make him aware of the consequences of his actions. This, of course, being one such case. Oh, and I do also need to cover for him quite a lot. This brings me to something we need to do no matter what you plan on doing."

The Malefic Viper waved his hand as a contract manifested in mid-air. "Gotta have to make you sign a non-disclosure agreement."

"Is that really necessary?" Jake asked. "It isn't like Sylphie or Sandy signed any..."

"Sandy is the Chosen of Snappy, and the hawk is blessed by Stormild and a peculiar little creature that is only loyal to herself and the people she fancies," Villy shook his head and motioned to Vesperia. "What we have here is a scheming True Royal Hive Queen with an innate connection to the Endless Empire, a notoriously reclusive faction, who also makes every single non-ectognamorph they ever allow to enter their heartlands also sign a similar agreement. She knows your secrets, Jake. Better safe than sorry."

"I agree this is the best solution," Vesperia agreed instantly. "The other True Royals will naturally want to know how I came to be, and they will be able to tell if I am lying. Something I would prefer not to have to do. However, if I signed an agreement facilitated by the system itself, I would be able to simply refer to that and only say the things we have pre-approved. But, I want to clarify, Malefic One, that my loyalties will, first and foremost, always be towards my hive."

"Of that, I am fully aware, and isn't that the core of this issue? The good of the hive is your prerogative, and if revealing everything about Jake can help the hive, you should have no qualms about doing so. Considering the Endless Empire is like one big hive, you get my drift," Villy said, leaning back.

"I believe the Malefic One misunderstands," Vesperia clarified. "Jake and I belong to the same hive. He is my sire; nothing will ever change that fact."

Villy raised an interested eyebrow. "Odd word choice. Same hive. Not that he belongs to your hive?"

"Perhaps the phrase our hive is more accurate?" Vesperia asked, sounding unsure. "To say he belongs to my hive would indicate I hold a superior position, but to say I am part of his would indicate the opposite, a sentiment I am not sure would be ideal considering he is not a Hive Queen. This may be presumptuous, but I view him as an equal in the hierarchy of the hive, us both at the highest position, but as my sire, he is superior to me as an individual."

"Interesting," Villy smiled, Jake feeling a bit uncomfortable.

"I wouldn't say I am your superior," Jake tried to argue but was shut down instantly.

"Attempting to dictate my personal feelings on the matter will lead to nothing," Vesperia shook her head. "This is only natural. A True Royal born and nurtured by another True Royal will still view their parent as superior on a personal basis even if they both sit at the pinnacle of the hive as equals. Fighting my nature is meaningless."

"As I said... interesting," Villy kept smiling. "Now, back to the contract. We will need to agree on what it says, but do note that it cannot include outright lies, or the entire thing will be deemed invalid. So we can't just write up some fake story that she can then regurgitate."

Jake nodded, considering what to do or say, as the Viper took the lead.

"I think before we move on, let me just make clear: you are planning on returning to the Endless Empire, right?" he asked Vesperia.

"As long as Jake is fine with it... yes," the Hive Queen nodded. "I am not saying it has to be immediately, but there are many reasons I should go."

"Understandable," the snake god said, looking at Jake. "Even if I decided to throw the full backing of the entire Order behind you and the Vespernat Hive Queen, we would still not be able to assist her a tenth of what the Endless Empire can. They have special resources, crafters, areas, heritages, teachers, and whatnot to assist Hive Queens. They have had eras to hone their skills in nurturing their own race and are far larger than the Order. There simply is no competition. Though I do wonder... does the Endless Empire have any special Lineage-specific items left for True Royals such as you?"

"I will know if I go there," Vesperia answered, clearly avoiding the question.

"Fair, fair," Villy nodded. "Now let's cook up our technically accurate story that is also full of deceit for this entire situation not to turn into a massive shitshow. Because that is a risk. While the Endless Empire and many other factions would love your ability to birth powerful variants, other factions, not so much. Especially Rigoria would be quite pissed if she found out my Chosen actively assisted them. One time can be written off, but if you decided to revive more True Royals... oh boy. The point is we need a story that can appeal to one side while appeasing the other. At least, that is ideal. I have a few options in mind."

The Viper changed the contract in front of him as a damn wall of text appeared.

"First story. Let me begin by saying that every single scenario will have us lean into the fact that you used a unique item during the ritual. While not stating it explicitly, this will make everyone believe it was granted by the system, and you are just one lucky bastard who stumbled across it and managed to do a ritual resulting in a True Royal appearing. If we lean into this and say it was a one-time thing, we would be able to mostly wash our hands of any future issues but will also gain no potential future benefits outside the Endless Empire potentially wanting to give you some kind of reward."

Waving his hand again, a second contract appeared.

"Second scenario. We blame it all on me. We can say that I assisted you – something I technically did – and helped provide you with materials and instructions to make it happen while still using a unique item. This way, most will write it off not as you being awesome but instead just give me all the credit. The benefit of this approach is that no one will really hassle you for it... but it will probably require fully outing you as my Chosen because there is no fucking way anyone will believe I decided to help some random alchemist in the Order."

Another wave and a third contract.

"Third one. In this scenario, we do a bit of a mix. Still a unique item, but we are changing the nature of how things work. Rather than be a one-time use item you acquired, it is an item with potentially multiple uses, but we will keep the exact requirements of how it can be used more times ambiguous. It is the truth that you cannot use it repeatedly and that there are requirements, but we also need to really emphasize that only you can do this. We can explain this away either with your arcane affinity or Bloodline, but I think it would be best to just say the item you gained from the system is Soulbound. However, be aware this solution is not without issues," Villy said.

"In this final scenario, we also need to have everyone know only you can do the required rituals. The good thing about this final option is that you won't have to reveal any secrets, and you can even keep your status as my Chosen hidden if you want to. It will make it a bit harder for me to protect you publicly, and do be aware that it will result in more... annoyances. Telling the factions that will come swarming you to fuck off like the Emberflight won't work. I am not saying this as in them deciding to keep pestering you, but that they will view your existence as of critical importance. Several factions may decide to assign you hidden guardians or try to sneak in people that can watch over you without revealing themselves."

Jake listened and frowned. He could totally see that last thing happen if his ability to spawn powerful variants was that important to many factions. Though he was a bit stuck on the word factions – plural.

"Who else would hound me?"

"The most obvious one would be some of the Beastfolk factions. Beastfolk are enlightened with either a class or a profession, which means their race is still incredibly important, and many of the ancestors of these beastfolk were absolute monsters. There are also some pure monster factions out there. Imagine if a faction with many phoenixes could employ you to awaken one of their offspring as a pinnacle variant of phoenixes? You need to remember you don't just create a single individual creature: you can create a starting point for an entire Lineage. Dragons, phoenixes, elementals... all races that aren't pure enlightened such as elves or humans, will want you alive. preferably under their wing," Villy explained.

Jake frowned even more and took a deep breath. He looked over at Vesperia for a moment. "What would you like to do?"

"I will leave this solely up to you and support any choice. However, while I should be able to convince the Endless Empire to not go overboard, they will find it difficult to understand why you don't entertain factions other than the Order of the Malefic Viper if you go with the third choice... no, even with the first one they will find it incomprehensible. You will be offered many things far better than even a high-ranking S-grade figure in the Order would receive, much less a junior," Vesperia voiced her thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, Jake stared at the ceiling for a bit. "This is quite the mess, isn't it?"

"It is," Villy agreed. "You settled on a choice?"

"Well... I am sure as fuck not giving you credit. There is also the problem of them potentially discovering Sylphie and Sandy and putting two and two together, which could quickly out anything that isn't at least the third option as a lie. You couldn't have been behind the rituals back on Earth, after all," Jake said, having actually considered the matter quite a lot.

The Viper nodded. "This is ultimately just a temporary solution till you are stronger."

"Yeah," Jake muttered and sighed. "Maybe we should just go with a fourth option?"

"What option?" the Viper asked with a raised eyebrow.

"A slightly modified truth. That I do have an item allowing me to create new unique items, but that the cost is high for me, and that this cost includes Records," Jake said, trying to voice his thoughts. "That the only way for me to become able to repeat the ritual is to progress in my Path, gain levels, and evolve."

He saw Villy begin to smile as he leaned forward.

"And how will you address those offering you a better environment to progress in return for leaving the Order and joining their factions?"

He had known this day would come for a long time, and honestly, maybe it was about time. The thought still made him uncomfortable, and he could see many issues pop up, but in the end, he would find himself covered in bullshit either way. May as well do it on his own terms.

Jake looked at the Viper and gave him a small smirk.

"Tell them to fuck off because I am already the Chosen of a Primordial."

Chapter 625 - Happy Little Accident

Jake had been reluctant to reveal himself as Chosen for a long time, and with good reason too. However, the more time passed, the more he began to realize how meaningless hiding his identity truly was. One day it would get out, whether he liked it or not. Be it through something like this where he did something a god would notice, and that god then leaked it, or through one of the people already knowing making it public. Either on accident or purposefully.

As for who would leak it purposefully? He had two names in mind who would do it for their own gain: Ell'Hakan and Yip of Yore.

Their entire deal was about building some epic tale of Ell'Hakan fighting the big bad evil Chosen of the Malefic Viper, so naturally, they would have to spread who Jake was far and wide to make the legend truly noteworthy. Jake could even see the two of them planning on using the fact that he tried to hide his identity as some kind of gotcha by revealing it during a crucial moment. Better he reveal it himself than allow that orange fucker and the delusional storyteller to spin it before exposing it to the world.

Then he also had to consider the fact of just how many people already know. Which was... a lot. Pretty much everyone on Earth knew he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and if they didn't, the smear campaign by Ell'Hakan and Arthur sure had made them aware. Many of those had probably shared it with their gods if they were blessed, making even more people know. With time, all of them would also be able to enter the rest of the multiverse, and he didn't trust an entire planet to keep quiet.

Chances are many of these gods who knew had already told their mates, and it could spread like wildfire any day. The Court of Shadows, Risen, Holy Church, Valhal, and a slew of independent gods and smaller factions all knew. Even if they were keeping it under wraps with only the upper brass being aware, it was still a bubble waiting to burst.

Also, one of the biggest reasons he had stopped bothering to hide it was because a lot of the fear he initially had didn't actually seem to be that well-founded. Miranda had been deathly afraid of him for a bit but now just treated him like that annoying manager who didn't have his shit together and made her do all the work. It was a pretty apt description too, and Jake knew that all the snark he got was deserved. What she sure as hell wasn't doing was treating him like some divine being.

At the Order, he had been afraid of Irin and Draskil and how they would handle it. The initial reveal had been far from ideal, and he had, of course, shocked both, but after some time, the awkwardness had mostly disappeared. There would always be some tension due to the difference in status, but that was hard to overcome either way if he kept getting stronger. At some point, people would begin to treat him differently, not only due to his status but his power.

Even Meira had gotten better at being more casual around him. Based on how she had been during their first meeting, the fact he was a Chosen had only made matters worse, but if even she could progress to a point where she wasn't too awkward, he believed there was hope.

Would there be annoying aspects to making his identity as the Chosen public? Yes. But it was ultimately his choice to be Villy's Chosen, and it was part of his Path. He could not keep suppressing it forever.

Finally... hiding it was just a bother, and he knew he himself would slip up sooner or later. Shit, he had already fucked up a few times, and if he went to Nevermore, he seriously doubted he wouldn't end up inadvertently revealing himself, so he better do it himself before even going.

Besides, if he did that, then Villy would get some nice clout from Jake's trip.

"About bloody time you came to your senses," Villy smiled, satisfied. "This would significantly lessen the pressure on you, as most will assume part of the reason you carry my True Blessing is part of this ability

of yours. Of course, I do predict some will assume it is linked to your Bloodline somehow, but I doubt anyone can figure out how it works, considering that not even I can. At most, I guess they will think you can do some presence manipulation and managed to leverage that during rituals to affect Truesouls. Now, how to make the big announcement..."

"Nothing big is needed; keep it casual," Jake raised his hands in defense. "Just send it out publicly to all the major factions that I am the Chosen, and I can reveal it to people when they appear before me... maybe you can just send out a brochure or something?"

"Are you serious?" the god asked.

"Yes?" Jake tried.

Vesperia shook her head, clearly judging his futile attempt.

"Oh no, Jake. We will do this fucking properly. You are my Chosen. Do you have any idea what usually happens when a new Chosen is blessed? I assume not, so let me give you a rundown. The last time the Holy Mother blessed a Chosen ten thousand years ago or so, it was a week-long festival on nearly every single planet controlled by the Church, along with a giant event on Primordial-1. Valhal holds a tournament where everyone who is within ten levels of the Chosen can challenge them to a fight. The Risen hold a huge coronation-like ceremony, inviting all major factions they have good relations with. It is a big deal and an excuse to show off," Villy explained with a grin.

Jake's face turned serious as horror began to sneak in. "You don't mean you want me to... no way."

"Yes way. If you do something, you need to do it properly," Villy said, his teasing smile growing. "A lot of things have happened, so maybe now is a good time to have a gathering of the top brass and invite several factions to display our power to the world with a bit of showmanship. Having you be part of that and publicizing your abilities during it will send a strong message. It will say that, yes, this ability is the real deal with an open invitation for others to approach us about it, and no, trying to recruit you would be a waste of time."

"You really want to turn this into such a big thing?" Jake asked reluctantly.

"The Malefic Viper has returned to the multiverse and begun expanding his power, and he has blessed a Chosen in C-grade with the ability to create True Royals and possibly other powerful monster variants. That is worth making a proper announcement to the entire multiverse," Villy made clear as he turned to Vesperia. "I assume you can wait till after this to return to the Endless Empire? It would be nice to have you around as living proof."

Vesperia nodded. "Naturally. It will also assist me in having way less explaining to do about my Origin upon returning to the Endless Empire, and if it can assist Jake, I am more than willing."

"There you have it," the Viper smiled as he got up. "I will begin to figure out the details, and we will have the big announcement in... let's say, a month. Don't want to potentially delay your trip to Nevermore. The old swordsman also evolved a bit ago, so the people you planned on bringing are ready."

"Oh, nice!" Jake smiled, but it quickly faded. "Shit, I totally forgot to talk to Carmen directly about if she wanted to join us."

"Don't bother; the Runemaiden wouldn't go with you even if she wanted to," the Viper shook his head.

"She needs to go with her own faction?" Jake guessed, based on what Miranda had said. He still wanted to ask her himself, but if even Villy said she wouldn't go...

"That is one of the reasons, yes. The other reason is a bit more complicated, but you will know in due time," the Viper said with a scheming smile. "All I will say is that the Order and Valhal are not exactly on good terms officially, so having my Chosen go to Nevermore with someone from there would raise questions and cause speculation we best do without."

"Aight," Jake just nodded, getting a feeling there was a lot more to the story. Turning his head, he looked at Vesperia. "You wanna go to Nevermore?"

"Would you want me to go with you?" she asked.

"If you want to," Jake offered

"I... will have to decline," Vesperia answered in a reluctant tone, surprising Jake. "Going to Nevermore for me is too early. It is better to return to the Endless Empire, and while combat is part of my Path, it is not the primary one. As a True Royal, I have responsibilities to my race that take precedence. I may go in the future, but I would not be a good member in a party trying to get on the leaderboards."

"Leaderboards?" Jake asked, throwing Villy a look.

"Don't ruin the surprise," Villy shook his head at Vesperia semi-jokingly. "You will know when you get there, okay? But yes, there are leaderboards and rankings and shit. That is also why you need a good team to go with."

Jake looked at the snake god before sighing. "Leaderboards isn't that big of a surprise."

"But it would have been a surprise."

"A minor insignificant one I already half-expected," Jake shut it down.

The god just shrugged. "If you say so. Back on topic. A month till the announcement, alright?"

"I guess I have no choice," Jake said in defeat. "What will you need for me to prepare?"

"Nothing, really," Villy shrugged. "You are good as you are. Though, as a friend, I will give you one piece of advice. Before Nevermore, you will need new equipment, and I would recommend that you try and get most of that done and upgrade some of your items before the announcement if you want to have a semi-normal shopping trip. The buzz it will create will make any casual outing an impossibility."

"Shit, that's a good call," Jake agreed, already foreseeing the awkward store clerks if he didn't.

"At Nevermore, there are a lot of shops too, many of them of a very high level, so you can also look for some stuff there when you go," Villy added on. "It is not just a big dungeon but has a massive city both outside and inside once you reach certain floors."

Jake nodded, not surprised at that being a thing. Why would there not be a city outside of a dungeon that nearly every faction on the multiverse sent so many of their members to? It had to be a gold mine for any merchant.

"I still need to find a fifth member," Jake voiced his thoughts out loud.

"We can use the announcement for that," Villy added. "Say that you are looking for a fifth person to join you at Nevermore. With the current setup, having a healer or, at the very least, a support type would make your group far better and speed up your progress. I actually already have some in mind, but with you officially being the Chosen, these other factions will happily have one of their top elites join you to advertise their strong relationship with the Order. And before you question if there are any good ones out there... a new universe being integrated always leads to an influx of geniuses. You and Ell'Hakan are not the only supreme talents of the ninety-third."

"I guess that is an option," Jake conceded, though he wasn't super keen on taking a stranger with him.

"Give it a chance. If it turns out badly, just reject them all and find someone else," Villy shrugged. "Well, I guess it is time for me to head off and begin to prepare stuff for the biggest announcement and event of my Order in over eighty eras. Bye!"

With that, the Viper teleported away, leaving Vesperia and Jake alone in the living room.

"The Malefic One is... peculiar," Vesperia muttered after a five-second pause. "I would almost believe him an imposter if not for his presence. His way of acting does not at all align with my Lineage Knowledge."

"Villy is Villy," Jake shrugged. He knew the Viper had a persona and a reputation, but in his eyes, the snake god was ultimately just his drinking buddy and friend.

"That way of referring to a Primordial is also... offputting," Vesperia shook her head. "Far too casual and lacking respect."

"Vesperia, that is entirely on purpose. I don't need to show I respect him by the way I call him or what tone I adopt when we chat. It may seem odd, but we have decided to be friends even if others find that odd or even heretical," Jake said, shaking his head.

"Is that why you are so reluctant for me to recognize your status as my sire? That you believe treating others with overt respect is somehow a sign of lacking desired closeness?" the Hive Queen asked with a tilted head. "Does that not sort of contradict your desire to show respect? Regardless of your own feelings, I view you as someone with a parental role due to your involvement in my creation, and I respect you due to that, but that does not mean I don't want us to have a close relationship."

The question took Jake by surprise, making him unable to formulate an answer. Her directly stating she saw him as someone with a parental role honestly felt so... off. She was a Wasp Queen True Royal, several heads taller than himself and with the mentality of a fully grown adult. Meanwhile, Jake was, well, Jake. But she did have a point. He couldn't just tell her how to feel, and he could not deny he was the cause of her creation.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to tell you off or anything like that; the entire thought is just foreign to me," Jake shook his head with a sigh. "But I genuinely have no idea how I am supposed to act around you, so feel free to give me any input."

Vesperia smiled and looked away. "Just... I hope you are not embarrassed that I am your creation. I do understand that I am effectively just an accident, but..."

She fell silent and looked away, not finishing her words.

It was only when she said this that Jake truly realized how much he had fucked up. Vesperia was good at hiding it, but many of the things he had said clearly hurt her, and when he considered her entire damn life so far... he got it.

Shortly after her "birth," Jake – who she thought of as a parental figure – informed her that she was effectively an accident and he had made her on a whim and he didn't really need her or necessarily want her around. He then proceeded to vehemently reject her view of him as her creator and told her that she could fuck off to the Endless Empire if she wanted. That she could go anywhere without him really caring. Jake had thought this was his way of telling her that she was free to live her life, but she had just seen it as a way to distance himself. Oh, and of course, they had then thrown in a quick spar where Jake had made it clear she couldn't even be useful to him in a fight.

Everything he had done so far was pretty much a rejection of her... at least, it could be very easily interpreted as that.

Jake collected his thoughts and considered his next words as he shook his head and looked at her. "How could I possibly be embarrassed? You are a damn True Royal that one of the peak factions would do anything to get their hands on. That battle form was insanely impressive and cool as hell. Who can't

appreciate a stinger gun? And I am genuinely looking forward to seeing what a True Royal is truly capable of.”

Vesperia did not respond but was uncharacteristically quiet. Jake was also silent for a few moments before looking at the ceiling before his gaze refocused.

”When I think about it... it’s actually a bit funny. Did you know that my first legendary skill was pretty much an accident? Or at least a coincidence? I had not planned for it. It just kind of happened. The same was then true for my arcane affinity; it just one day manifested while I was working on improving my mana. I didn’t even know what an arcane affinity was at the time. When I made a mythical weapon, I was completely out of it and just followed my gut, which ended up giving me a weapon I will probably use for life. Even my meeting with the Viper can be described as accidental.”

Jake got up and began moving over to Vesperia. She still looked down, but he knew she was listening attentively.

”When I think about it, most of the greatest things I possess and my best achievements came to be without me intending for them to happen. Maybe it is because I am a guy moving based on my instincts, but actions come before thoughts most of the time. This results in accidents, as you call them. Accidents that made me who I am today. Accidents which resulted in me meeting some of my best friends and companions for life, none of which I regret. You may refer to my unintended achievements as accidents, and I can’t really argue against that. But if that is truly the case-”

He smiled and patted Vesperia on the head, ruffling her hair and making her shiver.

”Then you are definitely one of my proudest accidents.”

Chapter 626 - Getting To Know One Another & Equipment Status

"Is he...?" the plump old alchemist asked as he looked at the screen.

"Yep," Vilastromoz confirmed.

"This scene is a bit odd, isn't it?" Duskleaf questioned.

"Not gonna question it," the snake god shrugged, not seeing anything wrong with the admittedly weird-looking scene.

They were naturally watching Jake give Vesperia head pats, the prideful True Royal sitting perfectly still but, based on the antennas shaking slightly, clearly enjoying it. If any outsider saw this, it would look like a younger man patting the head of an older woman, perhaps even finding the entire scene indecent.

"You know what Jake and I talked about?" Vilastromoz asked his disciple. "About him coming out as Chosen?"

"Yes, and I also know what you are going to argue," Duskleaf shook his head. "Him revealing it purposefully does not mean you win our bet on when he would leak it on a technicality."

"Well, he can't leak it if he openly reveals it, now can he? Something already well-known can't be leaked, can it? Or did the definition of the word leak somehow change within the last few minutes?"

Duskleaf just looked at him for a few moments before shaking his head.” Fine, you win, happy?”

“Not really when you act like that,” Vilastromoz pursed his lips. Still kinda happy.

“Our stupid bet is meaningless before what Jake managed to accomplish today anyway. I had assisted him in the ritual and based on the Sylphian and that cosmic worm, I had begun to hope he could perhaps even hatch a Quasi-Royal, but to see a True Royal be born... one of a fallen Lineage too,” Duskleaf said in awe. “This truly is unprecedented, and I feel fortunate to have been involved in her creation. Rewarded too.”

“Wait, you don’t mean?” the Viper asked, surprised.

“I did not expect to gain levels from a C-grade succeeding in a ritual I assisted with either,” Duskleaf shrugged and smiled.

Vilastromoz nodded and smirked to himself. So I wasn’t the only one.

Jake had to admit that his thought process when he decided to pat Vesperia on the head had not been all that sound. He had spent far too long considering what he wanted to say and not what he would do, but as he saw Vesperia clearly feeling sad, he did the first thing that sprung to mind: head pats.

Sylphie loved head pats... so... yeah, not the best logic.

However, to his surprise, the application of head pats turned out to be a great success. It was subtle, but he felt her slightly lean into his hand, and her antennas shook oddly as she just sat there, eyes closed. Jake had no idea how long he was supposed to keep things up, but considering her lack of complaints and his own amusement at the movement of the antennas, he probably went on longer than he should have.

For a second, he considered if she needed a hug, but that seemed a bit too much. Jake had never been the type to show much physical affection, and head pats were already a lot for him. After he stopped rubbing her head, she looked up at him with teary eyes.

She didn't speak but just stared. Jake, sensing some confusion, shook his head and grinned." Feeling better?"

"Yes..." Vesperia asked after a brief pause." I... am unsure... but what does the rubbing of the head of another signify?"

Jake raised an eyebrow and did the only thing that made sense. He patted her on the head again. "That you needed some head pats."

It once more proved super effective. Jake remembered his dad used to do it all the time whenever Jake got upset or if he needed him to calm down. It worked back then, and it worked still. He felt like it was a nice middle ground between a hug and just words.

Jake stopped soon after once he felt Vesperia was fully calmed down. He guessed that one of the reasons why she felt as she did was partly because she didn't really know Jake and that he often didn't act with thought, and Jake had to also admit that he didn't truly know Vesperia very well. They had just met, after all. So he thought it only natural to have a good conversation that wasn't about history, skills, or anything system-related. Just two people getting to know one another.

The next few hours were spent with the two of them just talking while looking around the rest of the mansion, Jake telling her about himself, and Vesperia sharing her own thoughts on different topics. Being a True Royal only born that very day, Vesperia had a personality primarily formed from her Lineage Knowledge and innate disposition, making her appear aloof and straightforward while viewing herself as a superior creature to most others. In some ways, she was the exact opposite of Jake.

Jake felt superior to pretty much everyone else, but he had spent his entire life working on not acting on this feeling. This was simply the coping mechanism he had learned while growing up to properly fit in with modern pre-system society.

Being a narcissistic asshole who thought he was better than everyone else was a great way to fail in the old world. True narcissists knew how to hide their true feelings and manipulate others, but considering Jake sucked at manipulating others socially, he just went with hiding how he really felt by suppressing it entirely. It had made him come off as meek and unopinionated to others and resulted in them often walking right over him, with Jake seemingly not caring. All done to try and fit in.

Now, in the new world, Jake still had this same innate disposition to reject others treating him as better than them in order to not stand out too much. He didn't necessarily view this as a bad disposition to have, and he himself felt like he had found a good middle-ground by not thinking he was innately better than anyone else while also not thinking anyone else was better than him. This went against his nature and even Bloodline, but shaking off his entire upbringing was not that easily done, and he did believe it helped ground him. Sim-Jake had been many things, and overly arrogant towards anyone that wasn't his literal clone in the real Jake was definitely one of them.

Vesperia never needed to suppress her feelings of superiority. As a True Royal, it would even be detrimental. She was born to lead her Lineage, born to be a decisive leader that would put their own existence over others. If she died, her hive would die, and she had to have a personality making her willing to sacrifice millions of her kin to keep herself alive. She fully embraced her role and innate superiority as part of her Path, outwardly displaying it with pride.

Perhaps Jake did have something to learn from that. Vesperia also seemed to think so and was gleeful when he actually asked for some advice.

"As the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, it is only expected of you to act with a certain demeanor. You are second only to the Primordial himself in the eyes of many, and if you act meek or like others are equal to you, it can prove detrimental to both yourself and your Patron," Vesperia voiced her thoughts. "Others will grovel, so just accept it with stoicism. Some will give you gifts, so accept them. These gifts are as much for the giver as they are for you. It is to openly display their support and respect towards you and the Order, and to reject these gifts due to your own personal feelings will be a slap in the face to the giver. It will reject their goodwill and communicate to the rest of the world that you don't want a good relationship with them. So just accept them with pride. If you choose to use the gifts is up to you, or if you choose to take advantage of those offering to serve you is ultimately your own choice, but do not reject what is given outright. Only do this if the gift is truly something you find offensive and want to communicate your disgust."

Jake had not considered much of what she mentioned and the broader implications of him sticking to his personal feelings on the matter. He had little sense of decorum or knowledge on how to act like a proper Chosen, and he knew that he would never truly be able or want to act like one. Jake was still Jake, after all. But it would probably be a good idea to begin putting some thought before some of his actions when he was acting in an official capacity.

When he was not... Jake still had Shroud of the Primordial and always wore a mask. Going out in public while staying incognito was still an option as long as everyone wasn't actively looking for him. He would just have to either wear another mask or walk around without one.

Well, could also make the big announcement with Villy while maskless...

Yeah, fuck that.

No fucking way Jake would do that. He felt like he had gotten better at dealing with social situations, but that didn't mean he felt comfortable at some big announcement where he was the center of attention. While he had some confidence in controlling his facial expressions, he couldn't entirely ensure he wouldn't slip up, and the mask was an extra assurance.

Also, he had to admit it did make him look more intimidating. A lot more like the Chosen of some snake god of questionable morality, that was for sure.

Vesperia and Jake's conversation continued for a while longer until they mutually decided it was time for them to get to deal with their own matters. Even if Vesperia did not have any special resources available, she still wanted to work on her skills and potentially spawn some proper guards for herself. She would only work on the eggs for now, but she seemed eager to get started following her Path as a Hive Queen.

Jake himself had a few things he also needed to get done before it was time for the big announcement. First and foremost was shopping, but he also wanted to warn those he knew in the Order about what was about to happen, so they at least had a heads-up. He did not doubt Reika, her roommate, all the alchemists from Earth, Irin, Draskil, as well as Meira and Izil would get hounded after his big reveal. It was only proper to at least allow them to make preparations for what was to come.

As for warning the Emberflight... yeah, he wasn't going to do that. They could learn the truth at the same time as everyone else and hopefully scramble in panic. He did want to be a fly on the wall for whatever emergency meeting they would have, but he would just have to ask Villy for an update as he was sure the Viper would take a peek if asked.

So all he really had to do for now was address his equipment. Something he had honestly neglected for a while. He was missing a lot of potential stats, and the defensive capability of his current equipment was less than ideal, so it was definitely high time.

To get an overview, Jake took status of what he already had, fully aware he would probably have to replace or upgrade everything. Starting from the top, he got on with it.

Cloak: Rewarded from the Undergrowth. Rare. Level requirement of 110, with the enchantment to hide him better and change color while self-repairing. Verdict: utterly useless for a long time and only functioning outside of combat. He would just replace this one. Also, he didn't need to go into that much detail with every piece of equipment if he didn't care much for it.

Chest: Auction after Treasure Hunt. Kind of okay, with good stats, but it was also to be replaced. Not worth upgrading, that is for sure.

Leg armor: Also from Auction, and also kind of okay for the time he got them, but ultimately just not that useful now. To be replaced, not upgraded.

Boots: Upgraded once in D-grade and to be upgraded again. They held secrets Jake wanted to know more about, but more than that, the enchantments they held were damn good. One allowed him to sense earthbound natural treasures, and the other reduced cost of his movement-based abilities. Both were not something he had seen before, and they were incredibly useful, even now, even if the one for treasures was very situational. So, yeah, to be upgraded.

Bracers: Cool enchantment allowing him to poke himself with thorns and poison himself, but it turned out the poison was too damn weak by the time he got around to trying it, and this function fell to the wayside. So, just subpar stats. To be replaced.

Rings: Altmar Signet was one of the rings, and damn, had Jake loved this one when he got it. It still gave a thousand stats, but that was not really that impressive anymore. It was an interesting item he would hold onto no matter what, and it would be worth looking into getting it upgraded if possible. As for this

other ring... well, Jake had only ever used that for stats too. It had the effect of allowing him to peer over long distances and at celestial objects, but that had never proved useful, and with Jake's already insane Perception, it didn't even seem to work properly.

Necklace: Spatial storage to be upgraded. Enough said. He had already upgraded it once and would damn well do so again.

Bow: Currently nearly broken but damn good, even if the enchantment began to drop off in usefulness. Look into potentially recrafting while retaining enchantment.

Quiver: An often unsung hero, allowing him to spawn arrows, including Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter within, and allowing him to store pre-poisoned arrows, so he never had to coat them mid-combat. Even now, it still worked as well as it did back when he got it from the auction, so he saw no reason to replace or even upgrade it.

Melee weapons: Blackpoint Nanoblade and Eternal Hunger. All good there.

Head: Mask of the Fallen King. Yeah, he seriously doubted he could get better there.

Gloves: This was the last and a hard one. In fact, this was probably the hardest one of them all, as the gloves were still damn good, but he also felt like he could get better. Looking at the gloves in more detail, he did appreciate them.

[Gloves of the Malefic One's Grace (Legendary)] – By the grace of the Malefic One, your scales shall be your instrument of invincibility. Created by an incredibly skilled crafter possessing the Blessing of the Malefic Vlper, these gloves contain but a fragment of the Primordial's will. Made from the hide and

scales of an apex wyvern, infused with its toxic blood, and enhanced by a powerful, refined core, these gloves are incredibly resilient. Allows Scales of the Malefic Viper to be cast directly upon the gloves at a significantly increased effect. While using Scales of the Malefic Viper, the effect of all stats granted by these gloves is increased by a minor amount. Only one who has shown sufficient proficiency in Scales of the Malefic Viper may wear these gloves. Enchantments: +300 Toughness, +300 Vitality, +300 Strength, +300 Agility, +300 Endurance. Requirements: lvl 175+ in any humanoid race. Skill: Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary+).

The level requirement was the highest of any gear he had that wasn't Soulbound. The stats were better than the Altmar Signet by quite a lot too, and they were, of course, of legendary rarity. The effect of making his gloves tougher with scales was also massively useful, and he had even used it during his fight with Vesperia that very day. Of all his equipment, this was arguably the best.

Looking at them, Jake suddenly got an idea... these gloves weren't bound to him. They were not broken in any way. He remembered that the place he had gotten them had a requirement that one could only get one item from there... so... what if he just returned these?

Maybe they offered trade-ins?

Chapter 627 - Shopping & Business Meeting

Jake was polite and asked both Meira and Vesperia if they wanted to join him on his shopping trip, and he quickly got two declines. Vesperia because she saw it as far too risky to walk around in public as a True Royal, and Meira because she claimed to be busy. The fact that she refused to even open her door and he saw her hiding under a blanket through his sphere made him doubt that explanation, but he let it go and just went by himself.

At least, he planned on doing that until he remembered he did have one person he could ask and at the same time inform about the upcoming big reveal. He was naturally talking about Irin. Meeting up with her would also give him a chance to ask about Scarlett, as Jake had not really heard anything from or about her ever since she went to join the Order. He didn't even have her contact information as they hadn't talked since she got her token – assuming she got a token, to begin with.

Taking out his own, he infused energy and reached out to the succubus. Within five seconds, she answered.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Lord Thayne?" Irin asked.

"Are you busy right now? I evolved to C-grade and need some new equipment, so I will go shopping for it soon, and a good guide would be great," Jake asked, thinking he could always bring up the Chosen thing if she agreed.

"When would this be?

"Nowish?" Jake said, a bit embarrassed. Yeah, giving some kind of grace period would definitely have been the polite thing to do.

"Give me five minutes, and I will come by your residency, alright?" she asked tentatively.

"Sounds awesome," Jake naturally responded, glad she agreed. Life without modern GPS to find stores and the ability to just search on the internet was tough, and he questioned why no one had invented magic internet yet. Or maybe someone had; the Order just wasn't hooked up to it. Either way, for now he would have to rely on an analog guide.

With five minutes to spare, Jake just looked on as Vesperia got busy setting up some magic circle of sorts on the lawn. Analyzing it a bit, he estimated it was made to amplify her own energy absorption speed

and potentially even allow her to better focus. It was the kind made to meditate within, and Jake wondered if maybe the circles Villy had Jake train within while upgrading his skills had similar effects.

Minutes rapidly passed, and soon he saw Irin appear within the mansion's entryway. She seemed to sense the motion outside and exited the door, instantly laying eyes on Jake and Vesperia.

"Hey, Irin," Jake waved to her the moment she came outside, but before the succubus could answer, her gaze wandered to the giant wasp woman working on his lawn.

She stared for a few seconds before glancing at Jake and then back to Vesperia.

"Oh," Jake noticed as he smiled and walked over. "Let me introduce you to Vesperia, a Vespernat Hive Queen."

Irin seemed to snap out of her spell and nodded slowly. "I was not aware you had a visitor. Someone from the Endless Empire, no less, based on her aura."

Vesperia finished up what she was currently doing and turned towards Irin, scanning her up and down. "A succubus? Unexpected. Your assertion is somewhat incorrect as I do not officially belong to the Endless Empire as of yet, and I would not call myself a visitor as this place is the only thing I have ever known since my birth."

The succubus got even more confused and glanced at Jake, full of questions.

"It is a bit hard to explain, but through means that I won't disclose right now, I managed to hatch a Hive Queen quite a bit more impressive than expected from that bee ritual you saw I had going on. That Hive Queen is Vesperia here, and she is... kind of my offspring? The word daughter feels wrong, but it is probably the closest we can get," Jake tried to explain.

Irin was about to question his preposterous explanation as Vesperia spoke up, adding fuel to the fire.

"Jake is indeed my sire, and I would call myself quite a bit more than simply impressive, considering my status as a True Royal of the Vespernat Lineage," Vesperia said with a big smile before looking at Jake. "If you wish to refer to me as your daughter, you are naturally free to do so, but it will raise questions, so perhaps simply say that I am your creation even if it feels less personal."

Nodding, Jake took it to heart. He had purposefully avoided just saying creation or spawn or anything else like that, which could potentially hurt Vesperia's feelings for no good reason.

The demoness slowly nodded along at everything that was being said before just smiling. "Alright, I think I understand. So, what did you want to go shopping for? Considering your evolution to C-grade, I assume it will be ingredients or equipment."

Jake found himself taken aback. "No questions?"

"A thousand, but I feel like asking them will just leave me more lost. Something like a True Royal is way beyond my pay grade, and I haven't even heard of the Vespernat Lineage--"

"The Lineage originally died off in the first era, and I am the reemergence," Vesperia added with a big smile.

"And as I was saying, then this is way more than I want to deal with," Irin shook her head. "Rather spend my mental energy on something I can assist with and get to the shopping. The less I know, the easier things will be for me in the long run. Either way, pleased to meet you, Vesperia. I am Irinixis from the Order of the Malefic Viper. If you would please excuse me, I hope to assist lord Thayne in his task without getting too involved."

"Alright, fair enough," Jake nodded. "Things will be better explained at the big announcement the Viper is planning for next month anyway. Oh, yeah, I nearly forgot to add I will also officially come out as Chosen during that ceremony thing, so that may cause some issues for you. Just thought I would let you know."

Admittedly, Jake was just teasing Irin on purpose now. He saw her just stare dumbfounded at him for several seconds due to the sheer level of importance of the information he had just given her and his casual delivery.

After five seconds, she once more nodded. "That is... I guess it is about time your identity was revealed to the multiverse as a whole, and... yeah. I assume I will hear more within the next month, but for now... shopping, right?"

"Shopping," Jake smiled.

Vesperia smiled off to the side and shook her head before saying something that this time around left Jake lost for words.

"An interesting consort you have taken, Jake. I congratulate you, Irinixis, on managing to seduce my sire. I am certain it is of great assistance to your Path considering your race," Vesperia said with a genuine smile, with not a hint of teasing or joking in her tone.

Jake was not sure how to respond, which gave Irin a chance to. She scoffed and shook her head. "If only. This guy only has eyes for fighting and alchemy, so it is a difficult work in progress that I hope will one day materialize, allowing me to assist in more intimate matters, too," the succubus shrugged.

"You know I am right here, right?" Jake said, scratching his head.

"Of course, Lord Thayne," Irin just smiled at him. "I was simply responding to the True Royal."

Jake took a deep breath and pointed at the door to the mansion. "Shopping time, right?"

Irin's smile grew. "Shopping time."

A meeting room materialized before his eyes as Sultan slowly opened his eyes, staring straight into the opposing seats across the long table. He felt presences also appear at his sides, and right across from him, a beastfolk woman popped into existence.

Sultan quickly scanned the room, seeing the nearly five hundred seats rapidly filling up. In truth, none of them were there in person, except for one person. At the head of the table was a dark elf in a golden robe, patiently waiting for all of them to arrive. Something they all did within thirty seconds.

One could say many things about merchants, but calling them tardy and accusing them of missing lucrative appointments was not one of them.

The elf regarded them and smiled as he began.

"I am pleased that you could all join me on such short notice, so let us get down to business. This is no social call, now is it?" the dark elf spoke, getting a few polite chuckles out from the people at the table. The dark elf was an S-grade, after all, so none dared show disrespect.

"While most of you are still in D-grade, the allure of Nevermore approaches for many of the young geniuses of the ninety-third universe, which should lead to a rush on the World Wonder, and we would be foolish to not capitalize on this opportunity. I take it you have all gathered goods unique to your planet and universe in preparation for Nevermore?" the dark elf asked the room, getting nods all around.

Sultan glanced at Renato, the only other merchant from Earth in the room. The other man returned his look and nodded, as they had both discussed this already and were ready. While they were not friends, they were ultimately business partners considering they worked for the same conglomerate. A single planet was simply not big enough to compete internally if you wanted to do business on a multiversal scale.

Hence why they both joined the Golden Road Emporium a long time ago and rapidly managed to consolidate all the smaller mercantile factions that had popped up since the integration. Something that had gotten far easier after the establishment of the World Council, leaving many merchants wanting to get in their good graces by joining up with Sultan and Renato, who could both claim to have worked with the World Leader in the past.

"Remind me, what kind of goods are expected to have the most demand?" a fish-like man asked the dark elf meeting holder.

"The dossier should have gone out already, but tentatively what should do best in the multiversal market is anything fitting characteristics that are considered unique to the ninety-third universe," the dark elf explained. "Especially rare natural treasures, rewards from system events, new plants and herbs, as well as minerals holding mana signatures showing at least an eleven percent energy-signature deviation from a similar mineral in the dossier. Naturally, if you have any talented crafters on your planet, bringing their goods could also be profitable, especially if they make use of nonconventional crafting methods."

People nodded around the table as another spoke up, an elf with bronze skin wearing a very expensive-looking robe. "How about slaves? We have a substantial stock of elves with potent metal and earth affinities, prime for mining and construction efforts in the newly integrated universe where only natives can go."

"Sadly, it is not currently possible to properly transport large quantities of living goods across universes, and even if we could, the cost would outweigh the profits. Hence why we are sticking to non-living items for now, and most should have already finished up their means to transport these non-living goods to the warehouse, but slaves would be an entirely different matter," the dark elf shook his head.

The bronze-skinned elf looked disappointed but nodded in understanding. The beastfolk woman in front of Sultan then spoke, addressing the elf. "If we can look into establishing an in-universe transportation system making the transfer of slaves feasible, perhaps we could discuss an arrangement. I am certain the World Leader of my planet would be more than happy with some skilled labor as our native population took quite a hit from internal conflict."

Smiling, the bronze-elf nodded.

The dark elf cleared his throat to get the attention of everyone back on him. "Internal business should be discussed later. For this meeting, we shall focus on Nevermore. Now, the first order of business is the assignment of representatives from those present. We shall choose five people in total who will liaison for everyone else, and-"

He stopped speaking mid-sentence as his eyes opened wide. "Excuse me, urgent matters suddenly came up. Let us reconvene in twenty-four hours exactly."

"What happened?" someone asked the S-grade dark elf in charge of their part of the ninety-third universe.

"The information is a bit delayed, but announcements have just been sent out by the Order of the Malefic Viper that they will hold a ceremony next month, which will include the formal introduction of the Malefic One's new Chosen. In addition, it will also share information regarding the resurrection of an extinct True Royal Lineage of the ectognamorph race," the dark elf shared, surprising Sultan for several reasons.

Firstly because they were all just D and C-grade, meaning this entire thing would surely be way above anything the Golden Road could expect the merchants in the room to participate or have any part in. Secondly, Sultan had not expected Lord Thayne to go public, much less for it to happen on such short notice. He could only guess it had to do with this True Royal, something he was not entirely clear on what was.

He shared a look with Renato, the other merchant clearly also clueless that this would happen.

"Many of you probably question why I even informed you of this," the dark elf spoke, addressing Sultan's thoughts exactly. "It is already confirmed that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper stems from the new universe, so the moment we know who it is, it will become a priority to establish contact and form

a positive relationship. They can at most be C-grade, so be ready if the Chosen turns out to be within a reachable distance.”

Sultan and Renato shared another look, Renato displaying a hint of envy in his eyes at Sultan managing to become the merchant officially recognized as operating out of Haven. Even if he did not work with Lord Thayne directly but simply helped Ms. Wells, that was already a far closer connection to the Chosen than any other merchant had.

The only problem was the taxes the witch forced upon him, but sometimes sacrifices had to be made... even if he did hope for them to not be that steep. Not that he wanted to complain too much.

He could only smile internally at the decisive decision he had made back in the day. Choosing to relocate to Haven and offer his services so early on had given him a foot in the door no one could compete with now, and his Patron was more than pleased by his accomplishments. There were some hiccups along the way, such as the unfortunate situation with the Chosen of Yip of Yore, but luckily Lord Thayne did not seem to hold a grudge.

Just as the dark elf was about to leave, he suddenly seemed to think of something as he looked at the bronze-skinned elf that had talked earlier.

“Your earlier proposal gave me an idea... finding valuable gifts to a Chosen of such renown is difficult, but perhaps there are some things we can offer. Alchemical ingredients or equipment will be numerous, but maybe we can provide him with something he cannot simply get from the Order of the Malefic Viper: manpower on his homeworld,” the elf spoke, clearly keen on the idea.

Sultan suddenly felt a cold shiver run down his back.

"Everyone present should look into procuring slaves from your universe we can offer to the Chosen, and-"

"Ahem," Sultan interrupted, getting a glare from the dark elf.

"What?" the S-grade asked, Sultan happy he was just a projected body and couldn't physically feel the pressure on him.

"Perhaps we should... reconsider," he tried to argue. "Not knowing who the Chosen is, perhaps they would find a gift of slaves offensive."

The dark elf shook his head dismissively. "We will naturally make a proper spread of sexes and races, hopefully allowing us to offer what would cater to his needs the most. Even if he already has enough slaves, there would be no reason to reject them as he could always just use them for colonization or expansion."

"What I mean is that perhaps the entire idea of offering slaves at all is ill-advised," Sultan tried again, a bit nervous.

Every single person now looked at him, with every single gaze showing disbelief and scorn... except Renato, who was the only one who understood.

"Sultan, your research on the Order of the Malefic Viper is sorely lacking if you even entertain such a preposterous notion," the dark elf scoffed before shaking his head and addressing everyone else. "Look

into the procurement of slaves and report back next meeting; I will have to take my leave now. And Sultan, you tend to have a good head on your shoulders, but I expect you to research the Order and, during the next meeting, explain to me why what you said just now was the words of a moron. Are we clear?"

The merchant could only sigh and bow his head. He still had confidence in saving the Golden Road Emporium from coming out looking like idiots... but...

That entire ceremony is gonna be a shitshow.

Because there was no way other factions didn't have the same "brilliant" idea as the dark elf.

Chapter 628 - Shopping Trip = Loot 6.0

Bringing Irin along for his shopping trip was definitely the best decision he could have made, as there was no fucking way he would have found all the good stores she knew about on such short notice. She gladly pointed out all the shit ones that overcharged customers, had untalented hacks working there, or those who had just recently had a change of ownership and were still untested.

Jake had never really considered it, but items could still be kinda shit even if they had a high rarity. Jake had not run into it yet due to all his gear usually being system rewards or crafted by talents, but sometimes items just didn't live up to their rarity. As one example, Jake saw a pair of leg armor with an epic rarity, good stats, and overall good-looking, but Irin pointed out that the string used to sew together the seams was of extremely low quality. The rest of the materials were good, and the item would work as advertised... until after a few battles when the threads would simply give out. With its lack of a self-repair enchantment, that just made them duds.

How exactly Irin spotted all these things, Jake had no idea, and her answer didn't exactly help either, as she just looked at him with a teasing smile and said she had a great "attention to detail" in a flirty tone.

Jake could not deny that Irin had gotten even bolder with her advances after his evolution to C-grade, but he still didn't give her an in.

He was too mentally occupied with thinking about Nevermore and the upcoming ceremony.

Anyway, on their shopping trip, they had not wasted their time. The first place they went to where Jake found something he liked was a place dealing with high-end clientele only that sold leather armor of different sorts. It was an entire crafting house with crafters all the way from early E-grade to the peak of B-grade. Irin had looked into them before coming and knew their best D-grade crafter had evolved only three years ago and was now in early C-grade, crafting high-quality equipment.

Jake had gone in with high expectations after hearing Irin's introduction of the place, and he didn't leave disappointed. The crafter had recently finished a set with a chestpiece and legguards from a powerful peak-level C-grade monster, and even if the price was steep, Jake truly didn't care as he picked up both matching pieces of gear.

[Shadestalker Chestpiece (Ancient)] – A leather chestpiece made from the hide of a peak-tier C-grade Shadestalker Monarch, infused with high-rarity shadow crystals to further increase the quality. The armor is incredibly resilient to all types of attacks and, due to its nature and the ability of the crafter to bring out the natural abilities of the Shadestalker, passively nullifies a portion of any physical damage taken. This effect is further amplified if both the chestpiece and the legguards are equipped. Is able to self-repair. Enchantments: + 500 Toughness, +400 Agility, +300 Vitality, +200 Strength. Shadestalker Nullification. Self-repair. Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race

[Shadestalker Legguards (Ancient)] – Leather legguards made from the hide of a peak-tier C-grade Shadestalker Monarch infused with high-rarity shadow crystals to further increase the quality. The legguards are incredibly resilient to all types of attacks and, due to its nature and the ability of the crafter to bring out the natural abilities of the Shadestalker, passively nullifies a portion of any physical damage taken. This effect is further amplified if both the chestpiece and the legguards are equipped. Is able to self-repair. Enchantments: +500 Agility, +400 Strength, +200 Vitality, +200 Toughness. Shadestalker Nullification. Self-repair. Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race

The descriptions of the two items were effectively identical, and they did the same thing, but even so, Jake did encounter something here he hadn't before. A set bonus of sorts. If he wore both pieces at once, the passive ability to nullify some of all physical damage taken was amplified, making the items better than the sum of their parts. Irin explained this was only seen with products from incredibly skilled crafters and rarely from dungeon drops.

Commenting on the armor itself, it was everything Jake was looking for. The design was black leather with little decorations, the crafter having gone for utility over appearance. The stats were definitely great, too, with the best thing being the Shadestalker Nullification enchantment. According to the crafter, Shadestalker Monarchs were near-invulnerable to physical attacks as their bodies were half-ethereal, making them incredibly powerful variants. Jake now having some of that utility was definitely nice, and maybe his armor would actually prove useful as more than just stat boosters now.

After the leather store, Jake rejected going to another kind of leather store that Irin tried to make him visit. He expertly managed to dodge her teasing innuendos and instead made her bring him somewhere he could get some bracers.

Even as they walked, Irin worked in the background, telling him that she had several people working with her behind the scenes to assist his quest for sweet loot. These other employees of the Humanoid Resource Department tracked down which shops had recent creations that fit Jake and were of sufficiently high rarity. So when Jake asked about bracers, she already had a place in mind that they had to teleport through two gateways to reach.

They appeared in a new neighborhood different from anywhere Jake had been before. Floating structures and massive towers and spires lined the horizon, and the mana was so heavy in the air he felt it faintly suppress him. Irin was even worse off, but she managed to keep steady as she explained where they were.

This was somewhere filled with mages, magic researchers, and crafters of the magical kind. No one below C-grade could live there due to the formation amplifying the environmental mana, and even if you were C-grade, it took a special visa of sorts to be allowed to stay long-term. Well, a visa or having the Blessing of the Malefic Viper. That one was kind of a free pass to anywhere in control of the Order of the Malefic Viper.

It had to be mentioned this place was only under the control of the Order and wasn't actually part of it. Jake saw that this neighborhood was primarily inhabited by elves, and Irin mentioned that roughly half of those living there had ties to the Altmar Empire or were members.

The reason they had come there was that a certain crafter had recently created a new pair of bracers that suited Jake nicely but, as with many eccentric crafters of high skill, did not want to simply sell them. In addition to payment, he wanted someone with a unique or special kind of defensive magic to allow him to analyze and record them and use the data for research purposes.

Jake saw no reason to not trust Irin and gave it a shot. The crafter lived in a large magic tower, and upon entering, Jake felt the mana be even denser. So dense that Irin chose to stay outside as Jake conducted business.

No one was inside the tower's entrance area, even as Jake walked in. The place was pretty big, the diameter easily more than a hundred meters, with nothing there being spatially expanded. Apparently, the high mana density tended to mess with expansion, and even if it was possible, the upkeep would go through the roof, not making it worth it. For this same reason, these towers did not have teleporters either but usually just used stairs.

After standing within the empty tower and inspecting the place's interesting design, he felt movement as a person began walking down the long winding stairs leading further up the tower. It was an older-looking gentleman wearing a mage robe.

The mage looked at Jake up and down before scoffing. "You don't look like a mage."

Jake could see what he meant, considering he had taken on his leather armor, clearly making him look like a melee fighter of some kind.

"I wouldn't call myself one either," Jake shrugged. "I am here for the bracers I heard you were offering."

"You have come to the wrong place, then. I am looking for barrier mages with unique classes and types of magic," the man politely explained. "That is my requirement for selling the bracers. Your information must have been lacking, seeing as you came all the way here."

"No, I know," Jake nodded. "I would say my barriers aren't all too shabby, and I think they would be of interest to you."

The mage seemed almost resigned. "Fine, follow me upstairs. You are the third person this week, so be aware my requirements are high."

Jake nodded as he walked up the stairs after the mage. He felt the other man was only in early C-grade despite how old he looked. Jake got the feeling his appearance was not one he had chosen to adopt either, like with the Sword Saint. This man was truly old. Considering he was an elf, too, he was probably even older than Jake guessed.

On the upper floor, Jake saw a giant magical circle filling the entire thing. He felt complex magic at work, but his skill in identifying this kind of formation was way below his skill level in rituals, so he couldn't really tell how it worked.

"The formation is made to record your flow of mana and analyze any barriers created within it, giving me data I can use to improve my own magic," the old mage explained, though his tone made it sound like he was just going through the motions. Clearly, his hope in Jake showing something interesting was near nil.

"Go ahead and enter the formation to display your magic whenever you feel ready," the mage motioned.

"Can I see the bracers first?" Jake asked.

The mage looked to be thinking for a second before just nodding. "Fine."

He waved his hand as a pair of what looked more like wrist wrappings than bracers appeared. However, Jake instantly felt the dense mana within and used Identify.

[Wrappings of Immutability Magic (Legendary)] – Wrappings created from fabric woven from special fiber, interwoven in a complex pattern forming an array. The bracers themselves offer little protection, as they will automatically fuse with the user if affected by anything that could destroy them. The magical array created by the pattern serves to empower certain forms of magic from the user. Increases the resilience of all magical constructs. Greatly increases the effects of all barriers made to protect your person. Enchantments: +500 Wisdom, +300 Willpower, +300 Intelligence. Resilient Magic. Immutable Barriers. Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race.

Just as he had used Identify, the mage took them away again. "As I said, they can be bought only if you manage to convince me with your barriers. I don't care about any amount of Credits you can offer me."

Jake nodded and smiled. "Just basic barriers are enough, right? I don't have any skills to summon barriers. I just free-cast it."

He saw the expectations of the mage drop even lower as he just nodded. "Whatever you think is best."

"Alrighty."

Jake still stayed optimistic as he went into the middle of the magic circle. Without further ado, he condensed his magic as he formed a barrier of pure, stable arcane mana in front of him. He held it as he stared at the barrier mage.

The mage just looked at the barrier for a few seconds before looking confused. "Wait a second, please."

He went over to the formation and squatted down to touch it. He closed his eyes and frowned deeply. "It works as it should..."

Standing up, the mage looked at Jake holding the barrier. "Would you allow me to check out the barrier in person?"

"Sure," Jake shrugged.

The mage walked over and began to inspect the barrier that just looked like a pink-purple-hued plane of glass. Jake felt him infuse some mana into it, forcing Jake to respond by also infusing a bit. The mage just seemed even more confused, and he looked it over and even took out something that looked like an icepick. He stabbed it into the barrier, making cracks form all over it, but they rapidly repaired and pushed the stick back out.

"What affinities are behind this barrier?" the mage asked, his demeanor changed from bored to extremely interested.

"I don't know exactly. It is based on my arcane affinity," Jake explained. "But I call this kind of mana stable arcane mana."

"Arcane affinity?" the mage nodded, impressed. "Marvelous. It registers as a physical object to my formation, yet when I inspect it in person, it is undoubtedly made of magic. Can you show some more variants of your barrier and make changes to it? Even if I can't tell anything right now, the formation is still gathering data I can use for later analysis."

Jake complied as he spent the next half an hour just summoning stable objects of arcane mana, even showing off the destructive part a bit here and there to show its ability to change. The more time passed, the more enamored the old elf was as he repeatedly praised Jake's mana and became the friendliest dude Jake had met in a long time.

After all was said and done, he practically threw the bracers at Jake, but even so, he seemed hesitant as he stopped Jake before he left.

The mage smiled as he shook his head and spoke. "I feel like I am almost taking advantage of you for showing me this. Tell me, is there anything else I can help compensate you with?"

"Probably not," Jake declined politely, adding on. "Not unless you have a ring for newly evolved C-grades with a lot of Perception on it."

"Something like this?" the mage said as a ring appeared in his hand.

[Opal Eye of Farsight (Ancient)] – A golden ring faceted with an Opal Eye Gemstone of ancient rarity, created by a talented crafter. The Opal Eye Gemstone is a natural treasure only found in environments with potent mana and is a favored item by all who seek to perceive the world better. Further improvements by the crafter bring out the innate power of the gemstone, allowing the user to temporarily infuse it with energy and greatly increase the effect of Perception on their visual organs. Enchantments: +1000 Perception, +200 Wisdom, +200 Intelligence. Opal Eyes of the Farseer. Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race. Must possess physical visual organs.

Jake stared dumbstruck for a few seconds. "Exactly something like that. How did you...?"

The mage smiled. "A close friend of mine is a talented jeweler, and I stocked up on rings I could offer in case someone showed me barriers not quite good enough for bracers but still worthy of reward. Do you want it?"

"Hell yeah," Jake grinned, having just spared himself going ring shopping with Irin, something that would no doubt have led to many comments from her.

The two of them chatted for a bit longer before the mage politely told Jake that he was eager to get on with the further analysis of all the data the formation had gathered. Jake said his goodbyes and walked down the stairs, leaving the elated mages to his business.

Jake exited the tower a happy man with a new ring and bracers before meeting up with Irin again. They had some time to spare now that he didn't have to go ring shopping, and Jake took stock of what he still needed to look into improving.

With four good upgrades in a day, this left Jake with his necklace, boots, gloves, and second ring yet to be upgraded or replaced. All of which had a bit more of a complicated replacement process. Irin had some ideas for this, but for now, they had other plans because – with permission from Jake – she had booked a table at a restaurant.

But not just for the two of them. A certain white-scaled danger noodle and her friends would also join them, allowing Jake to finally check up on how Scarlett was doing.

Chapter 629 - A Big Surprise For Everyone Involved

Thinking about it, the prevalence of restaurants pretty much everywhere in the multiverse was kind of weird. It was understandable they existed in low-ranked areas with a lot of people in lower grades, but somewhere like the Order? Barely anyone had to eat. Yet they were still in every single district, and from the looks of it, damn popular too.

Jake asked Irin a bit about the benefits of consuming food, and besides the minor buffs to regeneration and the fact eating restored some resources, there wasn't really any practical purpose. At least not from the food offered in restaurants like one could find in the Order. Yet it was just a custom to eat among people of all grades, be they D or S-grade.

"I think rather than question why people eat, you should ask why they wouldn't," Irin said as they made their way to the restaurant where Scarlett and her friends were. "We live long lives, and while you are pretty damn one-track-minded, the majority isn't. People need time to mentally recharge and simply enjoy themselves once in a while. It isn't even about being lazy. A few days of break from a difficult task can help you come back with a healthier mental state, allowing you to spot things you couldn't before."

"That makes sense," Jake acknowledged, even if he didn't feel like that himself. He never truly had the need to relax, but he could recognize that it was nice to just take time off once in a while, like when he spent time with his family. It also wasn't like this would hurt your Path in any way. With the lifespans people had in higher grades, it did become unreasonable to work all the time.

"Why do you think entertainment is such a big thing in the multiverse?" Irin smiled. "Many adopt hobbies even if they are not related to their professions, though the enlightened do have it easier as they can switch between profession and class to bring diversity into their progress. For monsters, in particular, you need something other than just constant work, which is why you stumble across so many forms of entertainment. Gaming houses, gambling, and competitions of all kinds can be found anywhere. Ah, and of course, one of the most popular forms of entertainment."

"I already know what you're gonna say, and-" Jake tried in vain.

"Sex, or, you know, brothels," Irin grinned, clearly enjoying being blunt with Jake. "Don't even think the people working there always do it just for Credits. You would be surprised how many individuals of all sexes and races go there not to earn anything but simply to entertain themselves. Many of the brothels aren't even about exchanging money. They are more just places where you meet up, mingle, and hopefully find someone else with mutual attraction. Of course, there are also a lot of brothels operating under far worse conditions, and the entire slave business is certainly propped up by people looking for slaves to entertain them, but you would be surprised by how rare that kind of thing actually is. If you can afford slaves, you are probably wealthy or powerful, in which case you don't need to buy partners who will willingly jump into bed with you."

"How did we get here from me asking why restaurants are so popular?" Jake sighed.

"Because I wanted to semi-subtly tell you that worrying about power dynamics when trying to look for mutual entertainment is kind of stupid as you take the topic way too seriously," the succubus smiled before looking slightly disappointed. "Ah, we are here. I should have walked slower."

Jake felt relief as he escaped being called out by Irin and looked at the massive building in front of him. It resembled a pagoda but with far more floors than was feasible on Earth. The entire thing was made of wood and very well-decorated. All in all, it looked like an expensive place to eat.

"Oh well, let's head inside," Irin said as she grabbed Jake by the arm and dragged him inside.

Jake was taken by surprise as he had been busy scanning his sphere to see if he could spot Scarlett, but he saw someone else he recognized before her. At a large table on one of the upper floors sat Reika together with her roommate, the beastfolk Bastilla. He hadn't seen Reika for a while, so it was a pleasant surprise.

Her being there also wasn't a coincidence. She was sitting together with Scarlett, one of the other human alchemists from Earth, and two scalekin Jake did not recognize. Considering they sat on the same side of the table as Scarlett, he assumed they were her friends.

Allowing himself to be dragged inside by Irin, the demoness just flashed the waiter a token, allowing them to walk straight inside and over to one of the teleporters. The floors of the pagoda were all individual rooms, and each could only be accessed through teleportation, with powerful formations also isolating the rooms for privacy.

Irin's token allowed them to teleport straight up into the room where everyone else was waiting. Jake smiled as he saw them, making his mask invisible.

They all turned to look at the two new people who had appeared. Reika and Bastilla were the first to turn and look, and they didn't look surprised, meaning they had expected him, with the human alchemist sitting with Reika also just nodded politely. Scarlett, however, had a weird reaction. Her face momentarily flashed a smile before her eyes turned into slits, and she froze, staring at Jake and Irin.

Jake followed her gaze and only realized now that Irin still held his arm, now tighter than before. Almost as if she waited for him to notice before letting go, she finally disengaged and bowed to everyone at the table. "Hello there, some of you know me, but for those who don't, I am Irinixis of the Humanoid Resources Department."

"Congratulations on your evolution," Reika responded. "To both of you."

She herself was still level 199, meaning she was probably working hard on catching up with either her class or profession or perhaps shoring up weaknesses before evolving. Bastilla was lower at 186, with the other human alchemist at 192.

"Thanks," Jake responded as he regarded them all, including the scalekins. "Jake Thayne, a pleasure to meet you all."

Scarlett seemed to have calmed down after seeing Irin let go of Jake, but she still glared daggers at the succubus before standing up and bowing. "Thank you for joining us, Lord Thayne."

Her tone was overly polite, and Jake could see she had clearly gone far for this entire event. She did not wear her usual dress made of her own skin but had gone out and bought one, and even her hair was set up. Remembering his recent conversation with Vesperia, he wanted to at least acknowledge the work she had put in.

"I should thank you for inviting me," Jake smiled at her. "You look great, too. It suits you."

It was just a small compliment, but Scarlett turned, well, scarlet in the face as she beamed. She quickly invited Jake and Irin over to take a seat, seemingly entirely over Irin's shenanigans when they entered. He said that, but she made Irin sit in the middle of the table while she placed Jake at the end of the table, with her sitting on one side and Reika on the other.

Jake also noticed something else interesting. Of the two scalekin with Scarlett, one of them was a female, and the other was a male, with the male staring at him quite intently. He regarded both and used Identify on the male and female, respectively.

[Azure Dragonkin – lvl 281 – Divine Blessing of the Venerated Azure Dragon]

[Thundervenom Adder – lvl 264]

He was surprised to see the male be a dragonkin variant and even have the Blessing of someone named the Venerated Azure Dragon - a Divine Blessing too. The name of the god struck Jake as a bit weird, but he chose to not question it. He just politely smiled and nodded at the two of them as he took his seat.

Scarlett instantly called for a server to take their orders using a token as she asked Jake about his new armor and recent evolution. Jake answered all her questions as he also checked her progress.

[Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake – lvl 289 – Greater Blessing of the Malefic Viper]

Jake hadn't actually known her level before, so it was a bit useless to just check it, but after asking, he learned she had gained four levels since joining the Order. This seemed low, but she had mainly been learning how to improve her current skills and better internally cultivate her venoms.

The Greater Blessing she had also wasn't something Jake was behind but was granted by Villy. The snake god had upgraded it after she had joined his faction properly, instantly giving her a high status within the Order of the Malefic Viper. From all he learned from Scarlett, he also came to understand why the male dragonkin didn't like Jake and why the Thundervenom Adder in human form threw him constant looks, almost begging him to back off.:

He was interested in Scarlett. Not that Jake cared much, except he did feel a bit sorry for the guy, as clearly Scarlett didn't know or didn't care.

"During my trial dungeon, these three asshole dragonkin tried to fuck this other guy and me over, but they were all idiots, not realizing that turning their backs on whoever they were currently backstabbing themselves was the worst move imaginable," Scarlett explained with a big smile.

"And you didn't get into any trouble for killing them?" Jake asked, not really worried.

"Nah, what happens in the dungeon stays in the dungeon, right? At least the assholes tried to claim that, so I guess their wishes came true," she said with a vicious smile. "Oh, and if I faced them today, it would be even easier. My necrotic and hemotoxin venoms were already quite potent before, but I have recently worked hard on improving ones causing paralysis, as well as ones affecting energy flow and mana control of the victim."

"You will have to show those to me later," Jake grinned, genuinely interested.

Scarlett suddenly turned slightly red as she hesitated. "Since you are C-grade now... should I come by your place for... you know..."

Irin, Reika, Bastilla, the two scalekin, and pretty much everyone at the table turned to Jake curiously while he desperately tried to figure out what the hell she was talking about. It took him a few seconds before he realized it as he tried to diffuse the situation.

"Don't misunderstand; she is talking about biting me and me potentially biting her a bit," Jake tried to clarify, but his words had quite the opposite effect as Irin raised an eyebrow, Reika looked surprised, and the male dragonkin looked furious.

"For research purposes!" Jake tried to make it clear once more. "For the Palate skill and stuff."

His words did not seem to help at all as the other female snake looked embarrassed and stared back and forth between them. Finally, Irin seemed to realize something as she burst out laughing.

"I keep forgetting how you seem to be unaware of all these things," she managed to get out in between laughs, her tone not insulting but as if she was simply stating facts. Which she kind of was. "Lord Thayne, in case you didn't know, then exchanging venom amongst snakes is viewed as quite an intimate act, and something one only does it with someone they absolutely trust, as it gives you resistance to the other's venom. To some snakes, it is even considered something you only do with someone you view as a mate for life."

Jake stared at her for a while, wondering if he should laugh along with her, as what she was saying was clearly a joke, but seeing no one else laugh – especially not Scarlett and the other scalekin – Jake came to realize Irin wasn't kidding.

Fuck me, not again, Jake could only curse as he scratched his head and laughed nervously.

"Well... you learn something new every day, I guess..."

Sometimes Jake really wondered if he shouldn't find a class in the Order concerning the weird customs of other races and how not to fuck up and create awkward social situations for himself.

"I... I knew Lord Thayne didn't know, so I didn't mean it like that!" Scarlett quickly said, glaring at Irin before whispering in a small tone. "It is still a bit embarrassing, though."

"How can someone blessed by the Malefic One be so ignorant?" the Azure Dragonkin said in a slightly mocking tone.

Irin looked at the dragonkin and smiled while shaking her head. "See, and I thought Lord Thayne liked asking dumb questions. Put two and two together why an enlightened from a newly integrated universe who is already in C-grade may not know everything regarding customs among snakes when he isn't even a snake himself. Think about it for two seconds, and consider that he may have had other priorities."

Her tone surprised Jake as she seemed all smiles, but her voice was sharp. The Azure Dragonkin seemed taken aback at the succubus switching from making fun of Jake to insulting him. "Why is some lowly succubus worker from the Order even still here? If you are done bringing your master here, leave already."

Scarlett threw the guy a disapproving look as Irin just shook her head. "Last I checked, I was invited too. Ah, but don't let me stop you, if my presence makes you feel uncomfortable, you are free to leave."

The Azure Dragonkin leaned forward and stared her down. "I thought your kind was educated in not annoying people you shouldn't annoy."

"I sincerely apologize. Do you want me to file an official complaint with the Humanoid Ressource Department on your behalf?" Irin answered with her best customer-service voice.

Scoffing, the Azure Dragonkin turned to Scarlett. "How do you even know this... woman?"

"She helped me join the Order and has continued helping me even after I joined," Scarlett answered, clearly not happy with the way the dragonkin was acting. Yet she also seemed oddly... perplexed? Why?

"You should reconsider the company you keep," the man said with a smile as he shook his head. "You are still new to the wider multiverse, but you can do far better. If you want to be respected, those around you must reflect your status, alright? Even if they are from your homeworld, the Order is your true home now, isn't it?"

His tone was like he was giving genuine advice, but everyone at the table knew it was an outright insult to everyone else at the table, especially those from Earth.

"Can't disagree," Jake spoke after a moment of awkward silence, making everyone look at him. "This guy clearly sucks; why is he even here?"

Jake stared straight at the Azure Dragonkin, meeting his glowing blue eyes. Jake did not have a doubt in his mind that this dragonkin exceeded him in power, but when had that ever stopped him from calling out people he thought were acting like assholes?

"I meant no disrespect to one blessed by the Malefic One, so why does he go straight to insulting my person?" the dragonkin acted offended.

"Oh please, the first words you ever spoke were an insult, and you haven't even cared enough to introduce yourself. The Thundervenom Adder beside you is also obviously afraid but subservient to you, and you sit as if you own the place while giving out insults veiled as advice while looking down on everyone present," Jake scoffed.

Jake saw the Azure Dragonkin's presence flare in anger, but before he responded, Jake got a telepathic message from Scarlett.

"Lord Thayne... I thought you knew Eranostromoz? He said that he had met and was on friendly terms with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?"

The words were filled with genuine confusion, making Jake also hesitate. What was she on about? As Jake still tried to understand what was happening, a server entered the room with several drinks for the table. Jake took notice of him through his sphere but didn't do or say anything as the male dragonkin server began placing down drinks for each of them.

"It is impressive how much importance you think your status holds simply because you managed to get yourself a Lesser Blessing," the guy, who was apparently called Eranostromoz, said with a mocking tone.

Jake frowned even more as he had a realization. He hid a smile as he asked: "Scarlett just informed me... you know the identity of the Malefic One's Chosen?"

He tried to act nervous, and even if he would give his own acting a measly three out of ten, the Azure Dragonkin clearly bought it. "Know him? I have met him, and we are on friendly terms. Have you heard of the announcement coming in a month's time? All will be revealed there."

"You really know him?" Jake once more tried to act astonished. Scarlett, Irin, and Reika had all picked up on what was happening – or at least they think they did - and held their tongues and let Jake do his thing as the guy dug his grave deeper and deeper.

"Is it that surprising that we rare dragonkin variants know one another?" he said, trying to act smug. "Oh no, I may have revealed a bit too much there."

"You don't mean... is he perhaps called Draskil, the Malefic Dragonkin?" Irin came in with the assist, her eyes wide and her mouth gaping. Ten out of ten acting from her.

The Azure Dragonkin grinned. "So even someone as lowly as you are aware of him."

"That can't be..." Jake said with faux horror before he aggressively turned his head to look at the server currently placing down a glass in front of Irin as he spoke in an offended tone. "When the hell did you make Draskil your Chosen?"

The server stopped and turned to Jake as he put up his hands defensively. "Hey, don't look at me; I didn't know I had gotten a new one either!"

Chapter 630 - Lack Of Humor

The entire room appeared frozen as Jake and Villy grinned at each other, Jake finding the prank from the Viper funny. He had, of course, seen him act like a servant, as Jake's sphere didn't care about the illusion the god had placed upon himself. From the Viper's grin, Jake had acted just as predicted, resulting in a great prank.

At least Jake thought it was a good prank... the problem was, someone else clearly didn't.

"Are you mocking a Primordial?" the Azure Dragonkin practically roared as he stood up. Scarlett tried to stop him as she realized, but she was too slow. The Dragonkin went not for Jake but for the poor waiter as he grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off the ground.

"A mere servant using the name of the Malefic One in vain to mock him and his Chosen in the very same breath," he seethed, tightening his grip. "Fucking heretic. I should kill you on the spot."

The jovial smile of the Viper slowly faded as he looked at the dragonkin. He did not speak as his illusion slowly dissolved, revealing the humanoid form of the Malfic Viper. At the same time, Jake felt a wave of energy pass through him, and on the floor below, he saw those eating suddenly freeze halfway through their actions; time itself stopped.

Then came the presence.

The arm of the Azure Dragonkin began turning to dust as he tried to scream, but he couldn't get any words out as he was slammed into the ground. Blood poured out of his eyes, mouth, and nose, and his face warped from an expression of overconfidence to pure terror.

"You just had to go and ruin a good time," Villy stared down at the shaking dragonkin. Jake, for his part, released his own presence to try and protect the others at the table as he saw everyone else besides himself freeze up.

"The Venerated Azure Dragon, huh. You are blessed by a mere whelp of the true Azure Dragon Patriarch, and believe yourself above everyone else," Villy shook his head before looking up and addressing everyone else in the room. "It was a fun prank, right?"

Everyone nodded, not a single person daring to disagree. Even Jake nodded, not because he felt compelled like the others, but because he genuinely agreed.

"See, you just have no sense of humor," the Viper said. "Now, if that isn't blasphemy, I don't know what is."

"F... forgive..." the Azure Dragonkin tried to stammer out as Villy just sighed.

"Forgiveness? Alright, off you go. I am already done with you," the Viper shrugged, waving his hand as the Azure Dragonkin disappeared from the room. Jake considered if Villy had killed him, but he didn't feel like he had.

"A mere mortal whelping isn't worth killing; better for him to learn a lesson," Villy said, clarifying he wasn't dead as he went over and took a seat at the other end of the table opposite Jake.

"What did you do to him?" Jake asked curiously, wondering what the Viper meant when he said he had taught him a lesson. He didn't believe for a single second removing an arm and giving the guy a fright was enough for the Viper.

"You saw what I did; I destroyed his arm," the snake god said with a grin. "Oh, but not the usual kind of destruction. Let's just say he will have to enjoy the rest of his journey through C-grade jerking himself off with his other hand."

Permanent injury? Jake questioned himself but didn't ask further. He was curious why Villy hadn't just killed the Azure Dragonkin outright, but he could always ask about that later. For now, he wanted to fix the atmosphere in the room. Food orders had not even been placed yet, and things were already quite awkward with the Viper around.

Seeing the brief pause in conversation, Scarlett managed to collect herself as she stood up and bowed deeply. "I greet the Malefic One, Forefather of snakes," she said in an extremely nervous tone.

Everyone else followed suit, bowing deeply or kneeling in front of the Viper, with Jake being the only one not doing anything besides focusing on keeping his mouth shut and not trying to convince them that it wasn't necessary. He knew that was a losing battle, and ultimately, what did it have to do with him how they chose to treat his godly friend?

The last to grovel to the Viper was the most nervous person in the room: the Thundervenom Adder. She barely managed to stammer something out, her gaze filled with fear. It did make sense; she was the only one not a friend or at least acquaintance of Jake left in the room, with the one who had brought her – someone Jake assumed to be her superior – having just insulted a Primordial minutes earlier.

Luckily for her, Villy seemed to not really give a shit about her, or really any of them as individuals. Jake wondered why the Viper had even come, and a thought quickly appeared... but he still asked.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, I wonder?" Jake asked Villy after he was done getting venerated by the others.

"I wanted to come and hand you something personally for your upcoming journey to Nevermore and noticed someone mocking my Chosen, and thus me, so I felt compelled to teach him the errors of his ways," Villy said. "This is what I came to bring you."

He took out a crystalline object and handed it to Jake. Jake accepted and put it in his inventory without even checking what it was as he sent a telepathic message to the Viper.

"Bullshit excuse; you just wanted to pull off that tropey as fuck prank before I went public as your Chosen, at which point it would be too late," Jake saw through the ancient snake god. "You saw your chance, and you jumped straight at it."

"Guilty as charged, but don't act like we aren't equally to blame, so just play along and enjoy the damn item," the Viper answered, making Jake suppress a grin as he instead simply nodded.

"Thank you, I am sure it will prove useful," he spoke, trying to at least sound a bit respectful.

The Viper also nodded as he regarded the others in the room. "Carry on with your matters. Oh yeah, and keep your mouths shut about Jake here until after the announcement."

With those words, the Viper teleported away as time resumed to normal in the area.

No one spoke for several seconds as Jake broke the tension with a joke. "Relax, the big bad snake is gone now."

His words surprisingly seemed to work as Irin breathed out in relief. Only now did he see she had been clenching her fists so hard her nails had dug into her hands, making blood spill on her dress. The others were also far from unaffected, with the worst off still the Adder.

Jake saw her look at Scarlett, probably asking something telepathically, as she stared at Jake with wide eyes the next moment.

Oh yeah, she is the only one left who didn't know I was the Chosen, Jake reminded himself. That was probably another reason why Villy had so casually intruded: they all knew who he was already. Proof of how shit Jake actually was at hiding his identity.

"That was... something," Irin spoke, her breathing still labored. "I still find it difficult to comprehend how you can be so casual around the Malefic One."

"We're friends. Hard to be friends if you are all serious and tense all the time," Jake just answered, getting another amazed stare from the Adder.

"As I said, it's all very much... something," Irin repeated.

Silence once more fell over the room as Jake considered if he had to be the one to break it. Luckily, at that moment, a waiter – a real one this time around – entered, also holding a tray of drinks. He was a scalekin and stopped when he saw they already had glasses.

"Ah, I apologize. Did another attendant already take your orders?" the man asked, confused.

Jake looked at the glasses left by Villy before shaking his head. "No, we would like to order now."

"Certainly," the waiter did not question anything as he proceeded to note down what they wanted. The waiter coming now turned out to be damn great timing as it brought a sense of normalcy back to the room, and after he left, the tension was mostly gone and allowed them to have some proper chats.

The Thundervenom Adder still looked out of place and even offered to leave, but Scarlett wanted her to stay, and Jake didn't care, so she remained even if she didn't really speak at all unless asked something. Once the food came, she also really dove into her meal to avoid any conversations.

Even then, it turned out to be a pleasant evening, and Jake ended up eating several kinds of food he quite frankly had no idea what truly was, but it was still damn tasty. After his visit, he could definitely understand why restaurants were so popular if they all had food like this.

Jake got the opportunity to catch up with old friends while eating, learning what everyone had been up to. Reika had unsurprisingly just been doing lessons and steadily progressing, having even upgraded her

token to a gold token, giving her a private residence she had brought Bastilla to. Her alchemy had clearly progressed, and Jake got the feeling he had fallen behind her when it came to conventional crafting methods by quite a margin.

Scarlett didn't have as much time in the Order and had mainly just cultivated her venoms while trying to make new friends. She had met the Thundervenom Adder during one of her lessons, and seeing as they were both snakes, they had connected, and the Thundervenom had later introduced Scarlett to the Azure Dragonkin. This was also when Jake learned that the Adder was effectively working for the Azureflight, one of the Dragonflight like the Emberflight, and naturally, the one the Azure Dragonkin belonged to. That entire relationship was now heavily jeopardized, making Jake feel bad about putting her in an awkward position.

The Thundervenom Adder staying with Jake and Scarlett could easily be viewed as a betrayal by the Azure Dragonkin, who probably wasn't happy with losing an arm. The Dragonflight definitely wasn't happy and would maybe even punish her and place the blame on her, even if it was bullshit. So, he decided that if he was going to come out as the Chosen, he might as well make use of it.

"Considering you are a friend of Scarlett, you are also invited along with her to the ceremony next month, and I hope you can attend," Jake said with a smile as he threw Irin a look before going back to the Adder. "In fact, I would question if you didn't show up."

"I would gladly make sure the Azureflight is questioned if you are absent, considering you are an associate of Lord Thayne," Irin followed along.

He visibly saw some of the tension leave the snake as she nodded and smiled with gratitude. Scarlett also looked relieved and happy. Speaking of Scarlett, Jake did learn more than he had bargained for after Irin spilled the beans with a teasing grin. Scarlett had – along with her venom cultivation classes – also attended ones about how to act with more tact and whatnot. One of them was about how to make those of the opposite sex like you more, which had resulted in her learning a few tactics Irin failed to hold herself back from pointing out.

Such as intentional mirroring. Jake faintly had an idea what that was, and it was pretty much about acting like the person you were talking to, with the hope of appealing to them and appearing more relatable. Scarlett had tried this quite a few times that day, with Irin specifically pointing out her inconsistent speech patterns and attempts to talk more like Jake by mixing in curse words and whatnot. Something Jake could honestly admit he hadn't even noticed.

This resulted in Scarlett firing back that Irin was also purposefully acting differently around Jake to appeal to him more, but that failed spectacularly as Irin just agreed that she naturally was. Her straightforwardness left the snake girl lost for words for a few moments, but she soon tried to go on the offensive again.

Jake did all he could to not get involved, though he did have to admit their bickering had thoroughly fixed the mood of their dinner party and made it no longer about Villy and his prank. Jake just spent the last parts of the dinner silently talking to Reika about all that had happened on Earth, but soon enough, it was time to head off.

Irin turned to Jake as they were about to leave and asked: "Do you want to continue our shopping trip now?"

He didn't even need to think about it. "No thanks. Not today, at least. Maybe tomorrow? I want some time to myself to recharge and stuff."

Jake could do social, but he could only do so much socializing before it was time to be antisocial for a bit. Irin seemed to understand as she didn't press. "Just call me whenever you wanna continue. In the meantime, what items are you looking for? I can get some proper research done in the meantime if I know what I am looking for."

"Hm, I mainly need items or individuals capable of upgrading existing equipment now. That, or at least a crafter capable of using existing items in recrafting. I guess I could also go for a new cloak, but I honestly feel like every cloak I have ever had was only useful for a brief period before just becoming obsolete," Jake shrugged.

"Can you send me a list of them you may want to upgrade and some basic info on them? With that, I can do a proper search to try and find crafters," she asked.

"Sure," Jake agreed and didn't wait as he sent over what he could. Information about his broken bow and wanting it recrafted, about wanting to upgrade his necklace, his boots, and the Altmar Signet, though he considered if maybe asking Izil about that would be easier, as he knew she was part of the Empire.

With everything sent to Irin, Jake headed home to the mansion for some alone time.

Oh, and to check out what the hell Villy had given him.

In a swamp within a massive dark cavern millions of kilometers away from the restaurant, a figure appeared in mid-air as he fell straight down into the dirty water. He had barely registered what had happened before he felt the water begin to erode his scales. Fighting through the paralysis and his own innate fear, he managed to drag himself out of the water and onto a root from a giant tree growing out of the swamp.

Eranostrmoz breathed heavily as he stared at the stump where his right arm had been. He tried to control his vital energy, but... nothing. Still feeling like he was in some kind of illusion, he took out a token and infused energy into it. Space cracked before his eyes, and less than a minute later a large dragonkin walked out.

"Uncle..." Eranostromoz said, staring helplessly at his arm. He hoped the A-grade in front of him could help, but...

The other dragonkin looked at where his arm should be for several seconds. "Desolation...Eranos, what have you done?"

He gritted his teeth and shivered as he remembered the eyes of a being he knew he could never compare to. "I... I fucked up... I fucked up bad..."