

Hunter 631

Chapter 631 - Getting That Booty

Jake appeared in his mansion and didn't hesitate to head to his lab to avoid conversations with both Vesperia and Meira. He felt drained from all the socialization and just wanted to unwind by himself.

Entering the lab, Jake took a seat on a chair and took out the item Villy had given him. The energy he had felt when he received it was similar, but it was only now he realized why. Because it was something he had seen before.

[Fragment of Akashic Awakening (Ancient)] – Infuse into a piece of equipment to attempt to awaken or amplify the Records within, upgrading the item to a maximum of ancient rarity. If the item is already of ancient rarity, it will try to amplify existing effects through awakened Records. Overall effects may be unpredictable. WARNING: Touching directly upon the Records of an item may make others related to the associated Records aware. As this is only the fragment of a token, chances of success are reduced based on the level requirement wished by the user. The lower the level requirement, the higher the chances. Requirements: C-grade

Or at least very close to something he had seen before. It was practically identical to the item he had bought from Sultan around the time he first came to Haven, but this was only a fragment and not a true token. Jake wondered where the hell Villy had gotten such an item and why he had just popped in and handed it to him, but on second thought, why would he want to waste brainpower questioning a chaotic snake god over a good thing?

The last time he had gotten the token, he had used it to upgrade the rarity and level requirement of his boots, and seeing this second fragment of a token, Jake already knew what to do with it.

It was time to make his boots even better boots.

Compared to most other items that were hard to use, this type of item did not have any input from the user or even allowed Jake to affect the process. However, Jake wasn't really worried. He felt like he was generally a lucky person, and the item said that it had a higher rate of success the lower the level requirement. Considering Jake just wanted a C-grade item with a level requirement of 200, it should be feasible.

And feasible it was. Jake took off the boots and used the fragment on them. His two worn leather boots easily absorbed the special energy released, and Jake instantly felt the change in their aura. Appearance-wise, they still looked like shit, but the description had been upgraded.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Epic)] – Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside at the behest of his master. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the ancient alchemist have left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. Further amplified by a Token of Akashic Awakening, these Records are now more prominent than ever, heightening their effects, although only a fraction remains displayed. Enchantments: +125 Endurance, +100 Agility, +75 Perception. Reduces stamina expenditure from all movement-related skills by a moderate amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants and natural treasures. Requirements: Lvl 125+ in any humanoid race

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[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Ancient)] – Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside at the behest of his master. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the ancient alchemist have left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. With every awakening, the Records within grow in power, the item improving in tandem to reflect its growth, even if many secrets within still elude you. Enchantments: +350 Endurance, +250 Agility, +200 Perception. Reduces energy expenditure from all movement-related skills by a moderate amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants and natural treasures. Requirements: Lvl 200+ in any humanoid race

Jake grinned at the description. It was very much the same item as before, with everything just getting improved. More stats across the board, with the most interesting new addition being to the movement-related skills enchantment getting better. No longer did it only reduce stamina consumption, but all energy expenditure. A damn nice upgrade for sure.

He put on the new boots and quickly sent Irin a message that she could scratch looking for any crafters or items to upgrade his boots. He also decided to make an agreement to go shopping in approximately a full day. All to give Jake some alone time.

Also known as alchemy time.

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Jake spent the next day working on poisons and attempting to improve his craft after reaching C-grade. During his crafting, he felt like his control had increased more than expected, something he wrote off as from the ritual and the upgraded core manipulation skill. As with most things, there were overlaps in competencies, so he benefitted in other areas when he improved in one.

He didn't craft many toxins during this time but was just practicing for the actual crafting session he planned on having after he was done shopping for Nevermore and was just waiting for the big announcement ceremony.

Considering everyone he planned on going with was pretty much ready for Nevermore, they would likely go shortly after the announcement. Villy had even hinted at it maybe being an idea to bring the Sword Saint, Sylphie, and Fallen King to the ceremony. In part to introduce them as his party members and in part for political reasons. Jake was still a bit undecided on this point and would just leave it up to the people in question.

As for inviting his parents... yeah, no way. Villy already heavily discouraged it, and Jake agreed with his points. They were simply too weak, and Jake did not want to drag them into a world they did not belong to. He had worried about them potentially becoming targets, but Villy had shot that down as a possibility.

This was one of the few cases where the reputation of the Malefic Viper came in handy. People would not believe his Chosen would give two shits about his own parents, thus making them useless to weaponize against him. On the other hand, people also wouldn't kill them as they feared Jake could see it as a slight to his honor. Finally, considering they were defended by the Court of Shadows, it just made it doubly bad to fuck with them for no reason.

Jake did plan on having family attend in the form of his brother. As a Judge of the Court of Shadows, he was already a person of note, and Jake being close with his brother also wouldn't be viewed as weird. Again due to the shitty reputation of the Viper. That Jake respected family who had shown they were powerful was only natural, while a disgust of weaklings was expected – even if they had given birth to him.

Anyway, back on the topic of shopping, Jake had already made plans with Irin to meet up after a full day had passed, and she had sent him a reminder or two. By now, she clearly knew him enough to be aware he would potentially attempt to skip it – something he totally wouldn't do – so she guilt-tripped him into going.

Jake had resigned himself to just go, especially as Irin promised she had some good spots picked out for them to visit. Cloak, bow, and necklace were the pieces of equipment they planned on addressing that day, with his second ring and, finally, his gloves saved for last. Jake still wanted to visit the Loot Tower of the Malefic Viper, but that was something he could always do alone.

The succubus came over right on the dot as he spotted her walking out of the gateway in the entrance area of the mansion. She had gone to the effort of changing her clothes and setting her hair while Jake

still had soot from going a bit too wild with his Alchemical Flame on a mushroom. Luckily for Jake, he had no sense of shame when it came to his appearance and quickly went over to begin operation shopping trip part two.

“Quite something yesterday,” Irin smiled as Jake turned the corner. “I had quite a few people showing interest after we left yesterday, including quite a few superiors who were practically shitting themselves at a high-ranking member of the Azureflight visiting the headquarters to apologize to me in person.”

“Sorry for the trouble,” Jake said apologetically, seeing how that could have been any-

“Are you kidding me? It was one the greatest moments of my life,” Irin beamed. “All of my colleagues stared in awe, an A-grade from the Azureflight bowing to me and giving a sincere apology... I loved every second of it. The only thing that would have made it better was if he had actually gone down on his knees. I can only imagine it getting even better after the ceremony once everyone learns who you are.”

Jake was momentarily lost for words as he saw her so happy. Especially when she talked about the guy kneeling... she was practically salivating at the thought.

And I thought succubi being sadistic was just a harmful stereotype... Jake questioned himself.

Then again, should it come as a surprise? Irin did like talking about leather shops, and she did recommend that one place the time he went shopping with Meira... yeah, he decided not to think too much about it.

“Glad to hear that at least one of us can have a good time from getting hounded by people wanting to kiss our asses,” Jake shook his head.

“If you pulled down your pants during the ceremony and mooned the room, people would gladly form a line,” Irin smiled before teasingly adding on. “And I would do my best to get in front.”

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow for a few seconds before Jake sighed. “Let’s just get going?”

“You’re no fun, but sure,” Irin grinned, satisfied as she took out her token. “Want to look for a cloak, bow, or necklace upgrade first?”

Jake thought for a second and decided to have the best for last. The same as how he used to eat all his vegetables first, he would do the shitty cloak before any of the others.

Irin nodded at his answer as she infused energy into the gateway, and off they went.

Shopping was a great success.

To skip over all the boring details, Irin had managed to do the impossible. She had managed to find a robe that wasn’t shit, and one Jake could actually see himself using for quite a while. The cloak itself was black as night and was incredibly light yet durable. The properties were, as always, where the real greatness was at.

[Midnight Shadow Cloak (Ancient)] – A cloak created from the essence of an unknown creature dwelling in the realm of shadows. Incredibly durable to all kinds of attacks. Allows the wearer to meld into the shadows when they stand still or move slowly, masking their presence and all of their actions, including

energies. Improved further if already dwelling in the shadows. When worn within the realm of shadows, the cloak will passively absorb energy to repair itself or assist the user during their travel through the darkness. Requirements: level 200+ in any humanoid race. Must have touched upon the realm of shadows.

The most interesting thing about this cloak was definitely the requirement to even use it. The requirement to have touched upon the realm of shadows was something Jake had never seen before and made him wonder even more about that weird place. Jake could only use this item due to his Eternal Shadow skill, and he knew that actually connecting with this realm of shadow wasn't easy and was most often only done by people following Umbra. Why it was even on sale at the Order was a mystery.

It was also interesting it had no enchantments section, but Jake had the seller explain that was due to the peculiar nature of the cloak. From what Jake could understand, the descriptions of items were sometimes just a bit inconsistent, especially with items like this, and as the seller began to list off some of the endless reasons why they could vary, he honestly didn't really bother questioning it more. The effects themselves were great, as it was effectively a cloak that functioned as a cloaking device, almost phasing Jake out of existence when he stood still and infused energy into it. It was bloody awesome, and the merchant who had it also seemed oddly relieved at getting rid of it. Surprisingly cheap too.

Next up was the necklace. See, with this, Jake had expected it to be hard as it was already at legendary rarity. Apparently, Jake didn't know jack shit about this kind of thing. Upgrading a Soulbound legendary item like his Heart of the Alchemist turned out to be a lot easier than he had expected, though a lot more expensive too. But luckily, it was quite a known process, especially as it wasn't that big of an upgrade.

[Heart of the Alchemist (Legendary)] – Once merely proof you were a prodigy, now even more, as you have shown you have the heart of an alchemist. An ornate creation of high craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a Space Heart Gem in place. Innate power still dwells within the Records of the necklace yet to be uncovered. Allows the user to store items in a medium-sized pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side effects in temporal suspension. Allows the user to directly deposit beneficial products into their own bodies with a slightly improved effect (can only be used once an

hour). Enchantments: Alchemist's Spatial Storage. Innate Consumption. +700 Wisdom, +600 Willpower, +500 Intelligence. Requirements: Soulbound

200 more Wisdom, 150 more Willpower, and 100 more Intelligence was all Jake got out of spending what Irin called more than most late-stage C-grades had in funds. Jake did agree the price tag was big, but honestly, he didn't care much about money anymore. He had spent most of his life before the system obsessing over numbers on a computer screen going up, while now he only cared about the numbers on his status screen going up.

Their final stop was at a bowyer whom Jake showed his currently mostly broken bow. The man they met ended up calling his master, who called two other people who all wanted to study it. Apparently, system-given items like this were very interesting to crafters due to the enchants and how they worked. Apparently, the system did "perfect" enchantments, unlike most crafters, pretty much making every system-given item into a piece worth studying.

This did also mean they would not be able to upgrade it then and there, but Irin assured him these four bowyers were some of the best in the business. It took some convincing, but Jake ultimately agreed and let them study the bow and work on integrating it into an upgrade. They did not get an exact timeframe, but they claimed it wouldn't take super long as they just had to "copy" the blueprint of the enchantment before they could begin looking into recrafting it. Later that day, they said they would inform Jake and Irin.

This left the human and the succubus with quite a bit of free time.

As they walked down the street, they looked for a place to relax while they waited for the bowyer to report back with how things had gone, Jake finding it too much to stay around in case the big lion men failed the upgrade. He also hoped it would help the beastfolk focus to not have someone nervously staring over their shoulders.

They went to another part of the massive city surrounding the Order, one that was filled with bars, cafes, casinos, and whatnot, making it a true hub of entertainment. Jake enjoyed seeing the relatively modern-looking environment, and especially one tall building caught his interest. It was a tall sky-scraper-looking construction, shooting several kilometers into the sky, and looked damn impressive. Irin noticed his interest and explained.

“This is quite a famous building within the Order and has been standing for nearly a full era. It is a hotel operated by the largest merchant faction of the multiverse, the Golden Road Emporium, and is considering a landmark. Most often, it is used by individuals of high status and whenever any high-ranking visitors come by the Order and like this particular kind of environment. I am sure that with the upcoming ceremony, it will be full within the week. Ah, but of course, besides business meetings, quite a few people also book rooms for the more intimate kinds of meetings,” Irin explained with a smile, enjoying her teasing. “Why so interested? Wanna take a look inside and book a room? Maybe this could be my reward for helping you with all this shopping...”

Jake looked at Irin standing there smiling at him flirtatiously with the large building behind her and just shrugged.

“Sure.”

Irin looked taken aback for a moment before laughing and shaking her head. “You know, a poor girl like me could get the wrongful impression when you are so ambiguous with your answers.”

“No, I know what I said,” Jake confirmed.

She was stumped for several seconds as she just stared at him.

Jake stared back.

“You’re serious?” she asked with wide eyes.

“If you are.”

Irin slowly nodded as Jake went over and walked past her through the gate leading into the hotel, with Irin taking a few seconds before she rushed after him.

Look, when continuously confronted with an aggressively flirtatious succubus, even Jake had his limits.

And... hey.

Sometimes a guy just had to be a dude.

Chapter 632 - Surreal

Irinixis lay on the large bed and stared at the overly decorated ceiling of the ridiculously expensive hotel. The silky blanket barely covered her body, and she felt like she was almost in a trance. Every second she expected to wake up from some powerful illusion or cruel mental attack, but with every moment passing with nothing happening, the world was proven more and more real.

Turning her head, she saw the human lying beside her, hands behind his head, and his eyes closed as he looked to be meditating. If he actually was, she didn't know, as he seemed to always be aware of his surroundings even when he was supposed not to be. Proven by him opening an eye and catching her peeking at him.

"Something on my face?" he asked, teasing Irin. Definitely revenge for all the teasing she had done recently. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but answer honestly.

"No, it's not that. It's just that, you know... I thought it was a joke all the way up to when it suddenly wasn't," Irin said, still feeling like everything was a bit surreal.

"What? You thought I was some eunuch?" Jake raised an eyebrow.

"The thought had crossed my mind for a moment after you missed every subtle and obvious hint I dropped. Seeing as you showed no interest in the elf girl at your residence either, I kind of assumed you weren't very interested in anything like this," she answered.

"Just had some complicated feelings on the matter," he shook his head as he sat up.

Irin looked at him a bit and questioned something she had noticed before but never brought up. "That scar on your neck. Why is it there?"

He had just evolved and should have been able to fix something like that. Even the Azure Dragonkin would be healed by the system when he evolved, so no matter what caused a scar, the system would heal it. The only way it wouldn't disappear would be because the person wanted it to stay, either consciously or unconsciously.

Jake brought his hand to the small scar and smiled. “Just a reminder of this one time an old man nearly cut my head off. It was a good time, and I am looking forward to when a rematch feels right.”

Irin was intrigued but didn't ask more as she felt he didn't plan on sharing. Instead, she just snuggled up to him and just enjoying being there. Jake gladly threw his hand around her, and she wondered if he wanted to go for another round, but it seemed he just wanted to cuddle.

All fine by her, if a bit disappointing. Irin closed her eyes and laid her hand on Jake's shoulder as he also relaxed.

Irin couldn't help her internal questioning, which made this entire scenario feel so surreal. She truly had never expected to actually be where she was right now. She, a relatively low-ranked worker at the Order in bed with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. If it did ever happen that she managed to “snatch up” a powerful and influential person, she would have expected it to happen under far other circumstances. For her to perhaps just be one of many women who caught the eyes of some young master - that she would end up sharing a bed with hundreds. Not that she would have the undivided attention of a Chosen for an entire night.

To her Path, it truly was the equivalent of some C-grade crafter managing to create a peak-quality mythical weapon or a fighter killing a foe multiple times stronger than them.

As a succubus, she pretty much had to level her race through intimacy. She could also do it through practicing her racial magic or a bit from combat, but her Path was designed around what she and Lord Thayne had just done. It was a Path she had chosen herself, and she couldn't lie and say it was one she didn't enjoy. But, even so...

She almost felt guilty. Irin had always thought herself a very headstrong woman. She had to be if she wanted to survive the demonic corporate world, but even so. She truly felt like she had taken advantage of the Chosen, even if he seemed to think it was the opposite for some inexplicable reason.

It somehow just felt wrong. It had been one night – a long night, granted – but still just one night. The Velvet Mistress, who had long figured out who Jake truly was, had already hinted at this being a thing if she succeeded, but still. She couldn't shake the thought that it was too much.

Irin had expected levels. It was her Path, after all. But... really?

Wasn't it a bit too much to get nineteen fucking race levels from one round of fucking?

See, Jake had to admit that he often made spontaneous decisions and didn't always think his actions through before just jumping straight into things. When Irin had asked him outside of the hotel, a "screw it" switch had flipped, and he had gone and done just that.

The question is, did he regret this decision?

Fuck no.

The only thing he regretted was not doing it sooner. Lying there cuddling with a succubus who would put any model from the world before the system to shame wasn't something he could really be mad at himself for doing. He also began to consider how stupid it was for him to reject Irin over and over again because he thought he was taking advantage of her.

Vesperia had been right that he needed to respect others' feelings more. If Irin did not feel like Jake took advantage of her, then who was he to proclaim she was wrong? Even if he felt like that, it felt wrong to punish others for his own selfish feelings.

Not that he planned on being all selfless from now on by jumping into bed with everyone and anyone who wanted to. He liked Irin as a person, and he felt like he owed her, plus she was clearly interested in him with a form of affection he could accept. She wasn't like the Emberflight or whatever, who viewed him as a Bloodline Patriarch and nothing more. Irin instead just wanted him for those sweet, sweet levels.

Jake honestly felt like it was cheating seeing her level grow by nearly twenty throughout the night. By the end, she had stopped rapidly progressing, so he assumed it wasn't like she could spend a week with him and reach a B-grade, but it was still insane what she had gotten so far.

It was only now he realized why Irin had been so persistent in her pursuit. Her dragging Jake to bed was her version of Jake killing the King of the Forest during the Tutorial. Records, levels, skills. It was her Path, and Jake wouldn't lie; he was A-okay helping her progress. A more than willing helper, in fact.

Time passed, and they just lay there for a while longer as Jake enjoyed the moment. He felt Irin move about a bit, rubbing all over him before she stared up at him and smiled devilishly. Jake stared back and smiled before he went in for a final round.

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The two walked out of the hotel later that day, Jake feeling pretty darn refreshed. Irin walked next to him, stuck in thought as they made their way into the street. Irin was a bit more restrained than before and, of course, nineteen levels higher than when they entered.

“People may question my sudden growth,” Irin said in a worried tone. “Perhaps they may even suspect you. It is no secret I have spent time with you over these last few days and assisted you with shopping, and I had many people help me during this time. People who speculate for a living.”

Jake just shrugged. “Who cares at this point? What would they do if they figured it out besides making some preparations and maybe spreading information to a few larger factions? I assume most would know that spreading it far and wide when the Viper and I intend to keep it hidden till the ceremony wouldn’t be in their best interest.”

“I see your point,” she nodded before sighing. Irin then turned a bit more serious and spoke in a severe tone. “I sincerely thank you, Lord Thayne, for humoring me during this night. It means more than you can imagine and is invaluable to my Path, and is truly a disproportional reward for the assistance I have rendered you thus far.”

“Wait... really?” Jake said, looking surprised at Irin. “You actually thought I did it just to reward you for something? I don’t really operate like that. I did it because I wanted to, not out of any sense of obligation or whatever. I sure as hell don’t view it as transactional... ah, but don’t misunderstand; I am not looking for a relationship or anything, more just a casual thing when we both feel in the mood. You know, a friends-with-benefits kind of situation.”

Irin stopped in the middle of the deserted street and stared at him. “I... I was under the impression this was a one-time thing.”

“It totally can be if-“

“No, that isn’t what I meant!” she quickly tried to clarify. “Just that... ah, you can be frustrating sometimes, you know that, right? Most people with your status have very high standards and don’t just casually make decisions like this. They need to consider the political impacts, how their allies, concubines, or even wives perceive things, and of course, how their own faction would interpret their actions. Especially how their Patron receives it matters, and... are you sure this is wise? The Malefic One...”

“Gave me a mental high-five the second we entered the hotel,” Jake grinned, making Irin stare for a second. “Also, his thoughts on the matter are irrelevant to me. Sure, I would take his advice into consideration, but the Viper isn’t my boss.”

“He is your Patron,” Irin said in a rather serious tone.

“Eh, just a technicality. I call him a friend for a reason,” Jake shrugged.

Irin took a second before she shook her head. “I truly do find it difficult to interpret the relationship between a Chosen and a Patron. It seems a lot more casual than I had anticipated, but if your attitude is accepted by the Malefic One and the system, I have no grounds to commentate.”

“The Viper is fine with it. The system? Not sure on that one considering how it labeled me a heretic,” Jake said nonchalantly.

“I se- wait, what did you say?” Irin said, confused. “The system labeled you a heretic before you were blessed?”

“No, it labeled me one after I was blessed,” Jake clarified.

"But... you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper," Irin stated.

"Yep. And a heretic. It's all a bit complicated, but I don't really see it as an issue, and neither does the Viper. Ah, but probably don't spread it around too much. It would probably create a ruckus," Jake said, shaking his head.

"How is that even possible..." Irin muttered to herself. "And... why did you tell me?"

"In for a penny, in for a pound," Jake grinned. "You said early on you wanted to be my liaison or something at the Order of the Malefic Viper, right? Well, if you are supposed to act as one, then keeping something so huge a secret may just end up screwing me in the long run."

"You're serious?" Irin asked skeptically.

"I know it is a bit weird being both a heretic and a Chosen, but--"

"No, not that. About being your official liaison?"

"Well, I need one, right?" Jake asked rhetorically. He knew he needed one because fuck him if he would do all that political shit himself. "And I want someone I trust and actually like, not just some random person assigned to me by the Order."

"But..." Irin said doubtfully. "When I first approached you to be a liaison, it was due to you being a black token holder, not the Chosen of a Primordial."

"It's just an offer. You are free to reject," Jake made clear with a smile. "Just think about it."

"I don't really need to think about it," she shook her head. "Not accepting would be foolish of me to not want to be your official liaison. I am just worried I won't be able to properly do the job, and I am still only C-grade, so my abilities are limited, and I may end up becoming a liability."

"I believe in you," Jake said with a cheesy smile.

Irin smiled after a few seconds and shook her head helplessly. "Fine, but I will have to bring it up to my master and discuss if this is truly the best idea and, if I do it, how things will have to work."

"Understandable," Jake nodded. It was common sense to always take a bit of time to think before agreeing to an important agreement. "Now the big question... where off to now? Any news on the bow?"

"Let me check," Irin said as she took out a token. "Ah, yes, I got a message two hours ago. They need your presence there since the item is Soulbound, but they sound pretty assured of success if they get your assistance."

"Great," Jake smiled, glad that even a magical token could be silenced when you were busy with other things. Or, well, in this case, the spatial storage had just been muted. "Let's head over right away?"

Irin nodded, but he saw how she hesitated for a moment, making him reconsider as he stopped. "You know, I think I can handle this one myself. I also have another place I want to stop by later, and I probably need to go there alone. If you want to come along, you can, but if not, then maybe go talk to your master now? Oh, that can also help you hide your sudden increase in levels, right? Reduces the chances of being randomly spotted by someone you know."

He really tried to give her the excuse to leave as he got the vibes she wanted to. She noticed his attempt and smiled. "Thanks."

She went forward and gave Jake a hug as she leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Call me any time for anything, alright?"

Irin pulled away with a flirtatious smile before she took to the air and headed off.

"You know what, I just think I might," Jake spoke to himself after she was gone as he turned around and began heading towards the bowyer. As he walked towards the gateway he needed to take, he felt a certain someone poke at his consciousness.

"What's up, Villy?" Jake answered.

"I am experiencing some highly complicated emotions right now," the Viper answered. "On the one hand, it was about bloody time you bedded the succubus, and I can only commend the act, but on the other hand, I lost a bet with Duskleaf as I seriously thought you would get with the elf before the demon."

“How many fucking bets do you guys have going on?” Jake asked with exasperation.

“To clarify, when you say fucking bets, do you mean all how many bets in total we have, or how many bets we have related to literal fucking?”

“I... actually don’t want to know. So, did you want anything else?” Jake muttered telepathically.

“No, not really. I just wanted to praise your decision-making skills today, even if it was a far too long delayed choice. You humans and your odd ingrained values. Oh well, congratulations once more; see ya around!”

With those words, the Viper’s presence was gone. Jake shook his head at the snake god, wondering how everyone else could treat such a goofball with such reverence.

Oh well, time to get my bow, Jake thought, shaking off the thought.

Today had been a good day so far, and he hoped it would continue to be a good day and get his upgraded bow, as well as new or improved gloves.

Chapter 633 - Same Same. But Different. But Still Same.

Jake reached the bowyer after teleporting to the right district and quickly headed inside. Contrary to most other shops Jake visited, this one was far simpler and had a thoroughly tribal atmosphere. Pelts of powerful beasts lined the walls, and several bows used as showcases were protected behind barriers, proudly on display.

One of the four beastfolk that Jake had talked with last he and Irin visited stood in the reception area and noticed him as soon as he entered.

“Ah, there you are!” he said cheerfully. “The others are in the back with everything ready. Do you want to head back there and get this started?”

“Let’s get to it,” Jake smiled beneath his mask.

“Great! I must say, it is a wonderful item you brought us with a very interesting if admittedly not that unique, type of enchantment. However, it is rare that the system gives out such specialized equipment. Hence why it is such a great frame of reference when making our own similar enchants,” the man gladly explained as they walked to the back.

Entering the workshop of the building, Jake saw three other beastfolk gathered around a tub filled with some odd semi-golden liquid. His bow was hanging above it with some kind of oily substance covering it. The three beastfolk were talking as they turned and saw the two newcomers.

“Ah, you’re here!” the largest of the beastfolk said with a huge grin.

Jake looked at the beastman he knew was in charge, a large muscular guy with a mane for a beard and very obvious lion-like features.

“So, how are things?” Jake asked, looking at the bow and tub.

“Good, good. We have finished all we can on our end and need your assistance to get across the finish line,” the man said.

Jake nodded, motioning for him to continue.

“Two challenges,” the lion man explained. “First of all, the bow is Soulbound, which requires your direct consent for us to make any alterations or improvements. Also, let me make it clear, upgrading its rarity isn’t something we are capable of, and I dare claim you won’t find anyone in the Order of the Malefic Viper able to. System-given items like this are notoriously difficult to mess with unless you want to risk breaking them.”

Jake nodded in understanding. It was also one of the reasons no one tried to mess with things like unique natural treasures outside of just extracting the energy or in rituals. It was borderline impossible. “What is the second issue?”

“The energy the bow itself has adapted to. You said it was your arcane affinity, right? Due to the way the enchantment works, it integrates a particular type of energy and becomes adapted to that, but if the energy experience significant change, this in-built adaptation may become an obstacle. Your evolution to C-grade fundamentally changed your energy signature and thus your arcane energy, resulting in whatever the bow was attuned to now working against you, and my guess is that you then forced too much energy it was not adapted to through it, leading to its current shape.”

“I see,” Jake realized. While it was true the bow had felt different after his evolution, he had just written that up to the evolution itself and his change in energy. Now he realized it was in part due to how the bow worked. “So, what is the plan?”

“As I said, then this is one-hundred percent a repair job, but seeing as you have evolved and it is a Soulbound weapon, you may as well view it as an upgrade. The oil currently coating the bow is meant to soften it up a little, while the liquid below will drill into the bow and momentarily fill the bow with new life, allowing the wood to regrow. As the wood grows, it will also be strengthened throughout, but for this to happen, we need to eliminate the current energy adaptation and do a soft reset for you to re-adapt it afterward. We need you for this, as we quite frankly can’t get rid of your affinity without risking breaking the bow,” the lion man shook his head helplessly.

“Aight, can I remove it now?” Jake asked.

“You would have to before we can begin,” the man nodded. “If you need anything to help you extract it, we have some tools.”

“Should be fine,” Jake said as he walked over to the bow. He felt the energy trapped within and held his hand out toward it. Firstly, he changed the energy to be far more stable in order to not destroy the bow as he extracted it, and then he simply led the arcane energy out through all the small fractures. Strings of arcane energy exited the bow as Jake made it unstable once outside, allowing it to dissipate in mid-air. The entire thing only took a few minutes before the bow was cleaned out.

“Ya know, if you had done that before you began using it after your evolution, it would not be in the sorry state it is now.”

Jake felt called out but could only scratch the back of his head in embarrassment.

“No matter,” the craftsman shook his head. “You boys ready?”

The three other lion men cheered as the leader looked at Jake. "We are starting now. Remember to consent, or the bow is screwed."

Nodding, Jake knew how this worked, having done it with his necklace already. With a Soulbound item, you had to actively consent when any crafter tried to make changes, or all they would do was harm the thing.

Without further ado, the crafters got started. The bow got a quick treatment of the oily substance again, as Jake's extraction had destroyed some of it. Then, the bow was lowered as four runes activated on the tub, each crafter responsible for one. Jake guessed the entire tub functioned a bit like a cauldron, and the runes allowed all four of them to work on it at once. He also knew how difficult collaborative projects like this were and how much skill it took to not fuck it up.

Jake accepted their attempt to change the Soulbound item the moment it entered the tub, and he stared intently as the process began. The golden liquid slowly got absorbed by the bow as he watched on nervously. He hated this kind of thing where he could only be an onlooker. Nothing he could do would change the outcome, which was frustrating as hell to him. His nerves were strained, and all he could focus on was not distracting the beastfolk. He just hoped it would be quick...

It wasn't.

Eleven fucking hours, that is how long it took with Jake just standing there staring, the lion men all with their eyes closed as they focused. Jake thought they were done at several points, but the process just continued as the bow absorbed more and more energy. What was a bit freaky was how the liquid did not seem to act like a liquid within the tub.

After a lot had been absorbed, it began floating around the bow. Like the bow was a sponge, it all entered it, and by the end of the process, not a single drop remained within the large tub. The bow had

absorbed hundreds of times its own mass in liquid, and yet all that had changed was all the cracks slowly disappearing.

The wood that grew back in the cracks was slightly lighter than its surroundings but looked just as strong. At the end of the eleven hours, the crafters did one final push as the leader took out a handful of some sort of dust substance and threw it into the tub. The dust instantly whirled around the bow and entered it, resulting in a small blast of energy getting released.

“Great success!” the leader exclaimed as all four of them roared like the lion men they were.

Jake walked over and, after getting a nod from the lion man leader, picked up the bow. He used Identify on it and saw a very similar description.

[Bow of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] – A bow offered directly by the system due to Earth’s performance during the Treasure Hunt event. Once broken, now reforged, the bow is more durable than ever and has an even higher level of mana conductivity. This is a bow for an apex hunter who only seeks to challenge worthy foes and effortlessly strikes down those inferior that dare impede his quest. Increases damage done against foes dependent on level disparity – both lower and higher – up to a certain threshold. This effect is based on Perception. The bow is incredibly durable and will adapt to energy infused into it, beginning to take on its properties and empowering attacks using the adapted energy. Enchantments: Apex Hunter. Requirements: Soulbound

The only change was one sentence being added about it being reforged and how it was now stronger than ever. However, that far from told the whole story. Jake felt the bow’s higher level of power as he held it. Infusing a bit of his energy, he felt the bow greedily absorb it, and as he did, the lighter wood where all the cracks had been subtly lit up with the color of his arcane energy.

That looks badass, Jake objectively concluded. All in all, he felt damn happy with the upgrade and felt like the bow would serve him for a long time, maybe even all of C-grade. One thing was for sure, it was now even better than it had been before, and the bowyers had gone above and beyond anything he could have expected.

He turned to them and smiled.

“For the payment-“ Jake began as the lion man waved him off.

“Take it as an early gift,” the leader grinned and shook his head. “Sadly, our Patron will not be able to attend the ceremony, so we hope this will be adequate.”

Jake frowned at the man’s words. He had used Identify on all of them when he had first entered the shop, but none of them had any Blessings, and even now, it didn’t show they had any. Did they have skills to hide it? As for who the god was...

“And what god do I have to thank?” Jake asked, not sure who it could be.

“Gwyndyr of the Crimson Flame Pantheon,” the lion man said with much respect in his voice.

The same one who blessed Maria back on Earth, Jake thought, remembering the fire archer back on Earth who had worked as a mercenary for the Holy Church. Whatever happened to her, actually? Jake hadn’t heard anything in a while... oh well.

“Funny, this is the second time he has helped me get a bow,” Jake shook his head.

“I hope the Chosen takes no offense that we knew his identity without disclosing it.”

“I am not that petty,” Jake said and admired the bow a bit more. “Now, if you had ruined my bow, it would be an entirely different story.”

“Good thing we didn’t then,” one of the other beastfolk smiled, looking relieved.

After a few more pleasantries, Jake left the place with his improved bow, not a single Credit lighter. His next target before he would call it a day was the Loot Tower of the Malefic Viper, as he had decided to refer to it. It was where he had gotten the gloves and where he hoped to go and turn them in for new ones.

He didn’t make any unnecessary detours but headed straight for where he remembered the grand tower being located. It took him a bit to get there as he only went to the wrong place twice. He could already imagine how many days, if not weeks, he would have spent wandering around trying to find non-shit crafters without Irin giving him a hand.

Nevertheless, he reached his target location in a reasonable amount of time and stopped as he stared up at the massive construction. Jake went through the usual process as last time to prove he carried a Blessing, and for a few moments, he wondered if the one in charge knew he was the Chosen as he felt the attention of someone powerful on him, but it faded pretty quickly.

Jake was led to another area than last time – one for C-grades – where he met up with the same person he spoke to last time.

“You return quickly, having evolved faster than I would have expected,” the attendant said as he entered the room that Jake was waiting in. “Would I be right to assume the young master is here due to this evolution and potentially looking to replace some equipment?”

“That assumption is indeed correct,” Jake nodded at the hooded attendant. “I also remember the rule of only one piece of equipment per person... if I return the gloves I have right now, will I be able to get a new item?”

“As long as the gloves are still intact, then yes, they can be returned and a new item chosen. In fact, this is quite customary,” the attendant confirmed.

“Great,” Jake grinned. “I would prefer new gloves if that is available. Ones for new C-grades considering I recently evolved.”

Jake had taken his gloves off at this point and begun the unbinding process that one had to do with all items to allow others to use them. As he did this, he felt the stats slowly drain out of his body, which he had to admit was a bit uncomfortable, but it had to be done.

The attendant accepted the gloves and inspected them briefly before he answered. “We do indeed have more gloves. What is the young master looking for in particular? If he so wishes, we have more gloves in the same series.”

“Same series?” Jake asked in surprise.

“The same crafter who made the gloves you used in D-grade created a total of seventy-eight legendary gloves with level requirements between level 100 and 345, all part of the same series and all effectively identical,” the attendant answered.

Bloody hell, Jake thought. “Yeah, a straight upgrade would be more than fine.”

“Very well. However, before we can do the exchange, I will have to confirm you have Scales of the Malefic Viper at legendary rarity,” the attendant nodded.

“I could use the old gloves?” Jake asked, confused as he used Identity on his old pair the attendant was holding. Yep, they were the same, except for one thing...

Requirements: lvl 175+ in any humanoid race. Skill: Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient+).

Jake wondered when the hell that had changed, but after thinking about it, it made sense with the skill downgrades.

“Ah, sorry,” Jake quickly corrected himself as the hooded attendant gave him a weird look. “I must have misunderstood. Yeah, I still have it at legendary rarity.”

“I see,” the attendant said, clearly not believing Jake’s bullshit. The gloves in his hands disappeared, only to be replaced with new ones a second later. They looked mostly the same, except the color was slightly different, and the scales were a bit larger and tougher-looking. As he used Identity, he understood why.

[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 Viper, these gloves contain but a fragment of the Primordial's Records. Made from the hide and scales of a young True Dragon specializing in venoms, 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 stat points granted by these gloves are increased by a significant amount. Only one who has shown sufficient proficiency in Scales of the Malefic Viper may wear these gloves. Enchantments: +500 Toughness, +500 Vitality, +500 Strength, +500 Agility, +500 Endurance. Scaled Hands of the Malefic One Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race. Skill: Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary+).

The item was pretty much the same except for all the stats it gave being 200 higher, resulting in a thousand more stats total, which was frankly insane. It made Jake sure this was also a “better” legendary item than the ones he had before.

As for the change in scales... this one was from a True Dragon. A young one, maybe, but a True Dragon nevertheless.

Jake smiled as he accepted the gloves and didn't even get mad at the attendant waiting for Jake to actually bind the item and put them on before he seemed to believe Jake actually met the requirements.

“Thanks, mate,” Jake smiled at the guy.

The attendant bowed. “I wish you luck, he who is blessed by the Malefic One. You can always come and trade for more items, but please be advised there is a limit.”

Jake nodded. “Won't bother you too often.”

With that, Jake left the Loot Tower of the Malefic Viper and headed home after a tough day of screwing around and screwing around.

Chapter 634 - Mysteries & Intrigue

Jake went back to his mansion and decided to head outside and check up on Vesperia first thing. He walked out the door and saw a large magic circle placed on the lawn not far from where Vesperia had been born, the Hive Queen sitting in the center. A cocoon of energy surrounded her, and Jake felt she was in deep meditation. Looking at the circle, he was sure she would notice if he got closer, so he slowly backed into the mansion and closed the door after him, deciding not to disturb her.

Meira was out of the house, so Jake headed for his laboratory. On the way, he inspected all his new gear, feeling pretty damn good about everything he had gained. He nearly had all the equipment he would need for Nevermore with only the Altmar Signet left to address, but he hoped to bring that up with Izil if Meira could invite her over. At the same time, he would also reveal to the elf that he was the Chosen so she would not get taken by surprise at the announcement.

Now, Jake did encounter one problem with his new and upgraded gear. He was getting close to the stats-increase limit one could get from equipment, which had resulted in him actually hitting the cap in one instance. With the new gloves, he noticed how he got fewer stats than he should have, making him frown. More specifically, he got nearly 200 less Strength than he should have, making him wonder what was wrong.

He looked through his status and poked around before he remembered a system rule that frankly hadn't been relevant for a while. One could only ever gain a maximum of 20% extra in a single stat and a max of 15% extra overall stats from equipment, and Jake had hit the limit for Strength.

Staring at it for a while, he knew things would change when he got a new ring or upgraded his Altmar Signet, but... well, he did also have 635 Free Points he hadn't bothered to put anywhere after his levels from the whole Vesperia ordeal.

And he did also need more Strength as the stat was falling quite a bit behind.

So, in classic Jake fashion, he didn't overcomplicate things and tossed every single point in Strength, getting him above the cap and giving him a massive boost. The moment he put the stats in, he felt the rush, and he couldn't help himself from clenching his fists. He felt like he had just done some powerlifting and like he could lift anything, but the feeling faded within seconds as he adapted. Still, it was a damn solid boost.

Having nothing more to do, Jake decided to do some alchemy while he waited for Meira to come back. Jake still needed to get a good stock of poison before Nevermore began, and he also had to talk to Draskil to let him know he would go public soon. Lots of stuff.

Jake moved to sit down as he took out his cauldron. As he sat down on the floor with his legs crossed, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. The design of his boots meant there was a small flap around on the boots, both of them slightly ruined. Coupled with the leather that was thoroughly worn down, it had been well hidden, and it was only due to the odd angle when his legs were crossed that he spotted it. What he saw looked almost like some kind of writing, and as Jake looked closer, he saw it was extremely small text edged into the leather itself.

He was sure it hadn't been there before but had appeared after his latest boot upgrade. Jake had been a bit disappointed no new lore or hint had been revealed about the owner in the item description, so he got excited something new had happened after all as he read it:

I look forward to meeting you once more; our meeting brief yet impactful. Hopefully, sooner rather than later. Your Path truly intrigues me.

- A curious admirer.

"That's... odd," Jake said, confused.

Jake frowned a bit as he checked the description of the boots once more, seeing it was the same. He just thought it was a bit of a weird message to leave when the boots said:

Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside at the behest of his master.

Why would a master write something like this on the inside of the boots? Or was it the alchemist who wrote it at some point? Maybe he gave the boots to someone else... but... actually, why did Villy even have these boots?

Jake was pretty damn sure they did not belong to Villy, Duskleaf, or anyone alive. He also had a hard time seeing Villy write that kind of message. Also, when had the boots been left there? Jake wasn't sure how the rewards of Challenge Dungeons worked and if gods could change rewards given or if they were set upon the dungeon creation. If they were set, then these boots stemmed from the first era, which would limit the number of potential people even more.

Could they be related to the First Sage? Jake then questioned. Had they belonged to him somehow? No, that seemed off too. Monsters could not wear equipment, right? Also, why would the First Sage leave that message to Villy when he was actively teaching him? Why leave a message at all in the form of writing and not just say it? It would also be weird for Villy to leave something he had gotten from the First Sage as a dungeon reward, considering how much he had respected his master.

"I have no idea, man," Jake muttered to himself, kind of lost about what was going on with his old dirty leather boots.

He could ask Villy, but that would feel like cheating, and he wanted to figure it out himself. Shaking his head, Jake stopped thinking more about it and instead turned to the cauldron.

When in doubt, alchemy was the way. Not to actually address the doubt or any underlying issues but just to take his mind off things while simultaneously producing potent toxins to kill his foes.

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Irin had contacted her mistress shortly after parting ways with Lord Thayne and asked for direct teleportation to her private quarters to avoid going through the usual gateways. She knew that if she returned to the office, her colleagues would instantly notice and question what had happened, and it would invite unwanted speculation. Best she kept herself away from most others for the next month or so until after the ceremony. After that, she could return proudly and flex on them all.

Her mistress was fast at responding and used the token she had given Irin to locate her. Irin felt space in her immediate surroundings distort a bit later as she was teleported away and straight into the private chambers of the Velvet Mistress.

"Mistress," Irin instantly kneeled.

"You sounded so urgent; what is the--"

The Velvet Mistress stopped halfway through her words as she definitely noticed Irin's sudden growth. She got off the large bed she had been lounging on and swiped the veils hiding her form aside as she walked towards Irin. Irin looked up and saw the woman of such beauty she couldn't even properly describe it. Her entire being exuded charm, and Irin understood why even gods failed to resist her advances. No matter how many times she saw her master, she failed to hold back her sheer sense of awe at seeing a succubus so close to divinity.

"My dear disciple... if I remember correctly, you were supposed to be assisting Lord Thayne during these last couple of days, am I correct?" the Velvet Mistress asked with a radiant smile.

"Yes," Irin said, forcing herself to look at the floor.

Her mistress knelt down and took her hand as she made Irin stand. "So, my assumptions were correct; he is indeed the Chosen of the Malefic One. Curious why a Primordial would choose a human, but I am certain the Malefic One has knowledge we are not privy to. Nevertheless... I believe congratulations are in order, Irinixis."

The Velvet Mistress led them both towards the large bed as she asked in a curious tone. "Now, how did you manage to do it?"

Irin did not tell everything but did give a quick explanation about how he had suddenly just agreed, and they had gone into the hotel. She also briefly mentioned the conversation afterward, where Lord Thayne had mentioned it didn't need to be a one-time thing.

Her mistress looked incredibly interested and happy throughout, especially when she mentioned it was just the two of them and their talk afterward.

Sitting on the bed, the Velvet Mistress looked at Irin after she was done talking and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "Now, you never told me the most important part... how was he? Was he good?"

Irin subconsciously nodded before stopping herself and pulling back a bit. "I... I believe that should be kept between the Chosen and me."

"How fun; you are already defensive of him, huh?" the Velvet Mistress said with a small giggle.
"Interesting... and he wants to see you again too. Oh my, that is something, isn't it, my dear disciple?"

Irin once more nodded in confirmation.

"Truly, truly impressive. To snatch a Chosen after such little time and even hold his interest... marvelous. You have gone above and beyond, my little Irin," the mistress said with a happy tone.

Irin was glad she had been recognized and returned the smile. "I got lucky..."

"Luck, you say... or perhaps we had misjudged how difficult it would be? He is still a newly integrated young human man from the ninety-third era, after all, and even as a Chosen, he is still a C-grade man, isn't he?" her mistress said as Irin got a bad feeling.

The Velvet Mistress nodded to herself as she looked in thought for a moment. Then, she smiled even more than before and spoke words that made a chill run down Irin's spine.

"Maybe I should go visit and have a taste myself..."

Irin's eyes opened wide as her mistress continued.

"Or... you could invite him here for a private lesson. One you can both attend."

As much was happening within the Order of the Malefic Viper to prepare for the ceremony, so did the rest of the multiverse react.

Across the multiverse, the news put out by the Order of the Malefic Viper spread like wildfire. This was the first event open to the public that the Order of the Malefic Viper would hold since the return of the Primordial, which in itself was massive.

More than simply a celebration of his return, it was also the grand reveal of his Chosen, someone many had speculated about. Rumor had it that the Chosen was someone from the new universe and was at least in part a reason why the Malefic One even returned to the multiverse, which just made everyone all the more curious.

Much speculation about this Chosen was made, but few even considered the possibility the person was a human. Whispers of a Malefic Dragonkin were often brought up, while others pointed at other powerful entities. There were a lot of scalekins from a snake Lineage as examples, all of which were now scrutinized.

Considerations of what kind of gift should be given were thus rife. This was an opportunity, and all factions – big or small – knew this was the time to strike if they wanted to forge a new and powerful relationship or simply strengthen the one they already had with the Order of the Malefic Viper.

These gifts were all aimed at the Chosen, of course.

Trying to find something for a C-grade Chosen was difficult but possible. Finding a gift worthy of a Primordial was impossible for all but a handful of individuals in the multiverse. Even if they did want to present something to the Malefic Viper, the resources they would have to put into it would be enormous. A relationship with the Order was valuable, yes, but not worth going bankrupt over.

Hence why everyone tried to find something a C-grade would need or want. With little information about who or what this Chosen was, most went things generally useful to C-grades, with many even getting multiple potential gifts based on what kind of race and person the Chosen turned out to be so they would have various options to present.

Many also simply tried to figure out who the Chosen was. It quickly became clear some factions knew, but they kept their cards close to their chests. This left the vast majority to speculate based on little information.

Then, a bit after the initial announcement, more news about the ceremony came. Everyone knew this was a strategic choice to truly take advantage of the existing buzz to spread the news even further, which made them curious. What did the Viper have he wanted to add on that he believed warranted a separate message?

The added news turned out to not even be related to the Malefic Viper himself, but his Chosen. Scoffs were heard in meeting rooms all throughout the multiverse, individuals questioning if the Malefic One

had truly lost his marbles by focusing so much on who was ultimately still just a C-grade mortal... until they read the contents of the message.

A second wave rocked the multiverse, one rivaling the first announcement.

True Royal of the Vespernat Lineage.

Six words that meant little to some factions but echoed in the halls of others.

Followed by unbelievable words that none would believe if they did not come from a Primordial... this True Royal had not appeared by happenstance. Had not appeared because the Malefic One had done a crazy experiment. The Hive Queen had instead been created by a mere C-grade Chosen from the egg of a lesser variant and the unique talents and items of this mortal.

To add to the insanity, the message even included the fact that this wasn't a one-time thing. It was something that could be replicated, and not just with ectognamorphs either, but all Lineages. Yet another utterly outrageous claim that only held weight because of the source... but precisely because of the source, no one doubted it.

Even if details for limited, who cares? Even if the Chosen could not do this repeatedly, so what? The ripples went through the beastfolk tribes as a council was gathered, and other factions convened to discuss the impact of this. Some merely sat back and considered how they could take advantage of the situation, while a few silently seethed in rage.

Especially two factions took these news heavily.

The Automata Legion mobilized at the news of a True Royal appearing, their tone less than pleasant as they seemed keen on entering negotiations with the Malefic One to obtain this True Royal and eliminate it before it could become a threat.

The Endless Empire did just the opposite and reached out, making it clear they wanted to discuss ensuring the safety of the True Royal and would be more than willing to send protectors or take her in instantly. If not, then at the very least, offer support for her being there and more than generous gifts to ensure she stayed safe.

Throughout all this clamoring, the Order stayed silent, responding to no one despite the numerous attempts to contact them regarding the Vespernat Hive Queen. It was only after another full week a message was sent out. An utterly flummoxing announcement, relayed by the Malefic One himself:

“This ability is not mine, and the True Royal does not belong to me. The creator is my Chosen. It is his ability, his Path, and his sole decision. Every choice he makes is with my full backing. Every action taken by my Chosen is with my support, and every action against my Chosen will be viewed as directed against me personally. Expect retaliation.”

Fuel was added to the fire as the discussions only got more intense.

A lot of speculation, a lot of doubt, and a lot of intrigue about the situation, with only one thing being clear to everyone:

This ceremony would be interesting and definitely one to remember.

Chapter 635 - Questions For The Altmar Empire

Mushrooms were evil existences created only to bring suffering to everything and everyone. No one liked them, and they only created misery and sadness for anyone unfortunate enough to interact with them too much.

This innate evil gave them only two valid functions: to be destroyed or be used to destroy others.

Jake refused to see them have any other purposes. Hence why he had decided their purpose would be the latter. He would extract their vital essence and use it to bring down others in the form of poisons. He would allow the mushrooms only this one honor in their entire miserable existence, at least allowing them to display at least a smidgen of goodness by killing Jake's foes and-

"Lord Thayne? Izil said she would gladly visit later today. I finally got through to her," he suddenly heard Meira's voice from outside his lab, throwing him out of his incredibly productive thoughts.

"Great! Can you call me shortly before she is here so I can finish up and get ready?" Jake yelled back as he kept working on his current concoction, still not wanting to give the mushrooms any reprieve from their righteous suffering.

"Alright," Meira said, bowing outside the lab door where Jake couldn't even see her.

Shaking his head, Jake refocused his attention on the only proper use of mushrooms as he worked on creating some more poison for his stock.

It had been about two weeks since he returned from his final shopping trip, and Jake had only left his lab twice during this time. Once was to check up on Vesperia and ask how she was doing, and the other was to talk to Meira about seeing Izil concerning the upcoming ceremony and a potential ring upgrade.

During this time, he also cleared it with the King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint that they would all attend the ceremony. Miranda would naturally also attend, and the agreement was that Jake would go fetch them in Haven the day of, with Miranda handling everything with who from Earth would come. Jake just stayed out of it and let her take charge while she coordinated with the Verdant Witches on the Order side of things.

He had also called Draskil to inform him about the upcoming ceremony, but the dragonkin had already known as the news had gone viral through all the news streams across the multiverse. Merchants traded in not only items but information, and with news like this, they gladly spread it for free, as it only made them look good that a Primordial-level faction trusted them to communicate it.

The reason she hadn't visited earlier was because Izil had apparently been busy. This meant Meira could not get in contact with her, despite having tried several times. Where or what she had been doing, Jake didn't know, but he assumed he would find out later when she came by to visit.

When it came to his alchemy, Jake had been quite productive if he said so himself. It took over a week to get back into the groove of things as he had to adapt to his improved mana and the C-grade ingredients that also had energy of a higher level. His time making potions helped tremendously here, but it wasn't enough.

If Jake just wanted to make weak poisons, it would have been fine, but he wanted to make the good shit. He wanted rare C-grade poisons. Hemotoxins, necrotic poison, and his Sleeping Night Toxin, more specifically. Those were the three he focused on crafting rare variants of, and so far, he had succeeded with the first two, while the Sleeping Night was still a bit more challenging. It was also the most situational poison, but Jake felt like it could come in handy.

It had to be noted that, unlike skill rarities, items did not deteriorate in rarity between grades but were more set from the beginning. That was why something like potions had hard requirements for what they could restore, and the rarities of poison were pretty much solely dependent on the skill of the crafter and the materials used. Two rare poisons could also vary widely in potency based on who crafted it and who used it, with the rarity honestly meaning little in a wide context but only held meaning if you took the one using it into consideration. This was true even more so for Jake and all his passive skills related to using poison.

Jake kept working on his alchemy for a bit longer before Meira returned and prompted him that Izil would arrive soon. Finishing up what he was doing, Jake quickly cleaned himself up before heading out of the lab and towards the living room.

He saw Izil arrive as he walked over, and the two elves hugged after not meeting for a while. Jake stopped in the hallway and waited for a few minutes as he saw the two of them talking, not wanting to interrupt their small reunion. After they moved from the entrance area, Jake also resumed his walk and soon joined them.

As he entered the living room, Meira was bringing in some tea with Izil and her talking. They both became silent when they saw him and bowed in tandem after Meira put down the tea set.

"It has been a while, Lord Thayne," Izil said while bowing in a respectful tone.

"That it has," Jake nodded as he motioned for them to sit as he also dropped himself into the sofa across from them. "I hear you've been busy recently? I hope I didn't take too much time out of your day."

"It's all fine, I needed a break anyway, and this was a great excuse to also catch up with Meira," Izil shook her head, looking a bit frustrated. "Things are just a bit annoying right now with a lot of things to deal with."

Jake got the feeling she wanted him to ask more for her to vent, and he gladly obliged. "What kind of things?"

"This entire ceremony business!" Izil complained. "As a member of the Altmar Empire, I need to try and figure out a bunch of stuff regarding this secret Chosen, but the problem is that so is everyone else, yet no one knows anything. Even when I am not tasked with that, I need to meet up with contact persons and other factions. Oh yeah, and then there is also some grand gift I am supposed to come with input for, but how would I ever know what some Chosen of a Primordial want? Do they think I have met this Chosen or what? At least all lessons have been canceled until after the announcement, or this would have been the death of me..."

Jake did all he could to hold his poker face as she ranted, cringing back a bit at the second and third-to-last sentence. He also saw Meira stoically resisting saying anything. She was helped by the contract that restricted her, and Jake got the feeling this was one of the few times she was grateful for literally being unable to reveal anything.

"You must be swamped, too, as someone blessed by the Malefic One, right?" Izil then asked Jake, just turning the entire situation even more awkward.

"Yeah... well, this entire ceremony business was actually part of the reason I asked to meet you," Jake said, scratching the back of his head, embarrassed at the trouble he had unintentionally brought her.

"I will not lie, I had kind of figured it was related to that. I apologize, but I doubt I can help with anything; I am already overworked as is," Izil said with a sigh. "But I will try in any way I can."

“No, that isn’t what I meant. What I meant is...” Jake began before just shaking his head. “The thing is, I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.”

Izil looked at him for a few seconds before breaking into a smile and laughing. “You do have some talent in bringing up people’s moods, but I would be careful with such jokes. You may be branded a heretic even if it is done purely in jest. Thank you for the laugh, though.”

“No, it wasn’t a joke,” Jake clarified.

Izil stared at him for a few seconds with a confused look, clearly not quite sure what he was getting at. “I am not sure I get this joke...”

“I told you, it isn’t one. I have the True Blessing of the Malefic Viper, thus making him my Patron,” Jake said in no uncertain terms. “Ah, wait, this should do it.”

Jake manipulated Shroud as his full aura as a Chosen was unleashed upon the living room. Izil looked confused for several more seconds before her eyes opened wide. She barely managed to turn her gaze to Meira, who just nodded, confirming Jake was telling the truth.

“How is that...”

“Well, the short story is that I met the Viper through rather unique circumstances, we got talking, and I ended up walking away with a True Blessing, and now here we are. I wanted to keep it a secret for

personal reasons, as I am not a fan of being treated like some semi-divine being just because of a Blessing, but I knew the cat would be out of the bag eventually. With this entire debacle involving Vesperia – the True Royal Hive Queen – I knew I would have to reveal myself. So, better do it on my terms through the ceremony,” Jake explained.

The elf seemed to realize something then. “That bee egg ritual in the garden...”

“Resulted in the True Royal,” Jake confirmed.

“How is... you’re human, and...”

“It is what it is,” Jake shrugged.

Izil then turned to Meira, who looked apologetic. “I am sorry, Izil, I couldn’t tell you because of the contract, and Lord Thayne wanted to keep it a secret...”

“Then... everything with Nella?” Izil asked, all the puzzle pieces slowly finding their places.

“I handled it,” Jake said. “With the help of the higher-ups from the Order, who knew my identity, of course.”

The elf looked lost for several seconds before her eyes opened wide, and she practically fell to the floor as she kneeled. “I sincerely beg for forgiveness from the Chosen of the Malefic One; I meant no

disrespect with any of my prior actions or words. My senseless ranting just now did not in any way reflect the views of the Altmar Empire but was solely my own, and I take full responsibility.”

Meira quickly moved to help Izil stand up, with Jake not even needing to say anything as she comforted Izil. “It’s fine. Lord Thayne doesn’t get angry about that sort of thing.”

She looked at Jake for confirmation as he nodded. “I legitimately don’t really care about all these rituals of respect and whatnot, so don’t worry. I am the one feeling bad about swarming you with work related to finding out who the Chosen was when I could have just told you earlier or at least allowed Meira to tell you.”

“I thank the Chosen for his forgiveness,” Izil said in a small tone.

“Jake is just fine. If that feels like too much, Lord Thayne is also acceptable,” Jake said. While he respected others’ ways of calling him, he still wanted it to at least be related to who he was and not just his title as the Chosen.

Izil nodded but still looked stunned as if she was desperately trying to comprehend everything that had happened. Jake empathized as she tried to lift the mood a bit.

“Think about it like this: you were tasked with finding out things about the Chosen of the Malefic Viper from the Altmar Empire, right?” Jake asked.

She nodded without saying anything.

“Well, you got me right here. In addition to that, you are friends with Meira, who has worked here ever since the day I arrived at the Order of the Malefic Viper and is considered a friend of mine, too,” Jake smiled as he leaned back, happy at seeing Izil slowly realize the opportunity in front of her.

“Chosen of... I mean, Lord Thayne, are you truly serious?” Izil asked with a lot of doubt. “I am a daughter of a mere noble of the Altmar Empire, to discuss matters with me privately like this...”

“As I said, I don’t care about those kinds of things. You are here as a friend of Meira, and that you happen to also be a member of the Altmar Empire is just a bonus,” Jake smiled. “That was actually the main reason I wanted to meet. Can you take a look at this?”

Jake made his Altmar Signet visible as the ring appeared on his hand on top of his gloves. He hadn’t really looked at the description of the ring for a long time and used Identify on it as he also saw Izil move her gaze to his finger.

[Altmar N-Signet (Ancient)] – You have been judged by the Altmar Empire and found worthy. This ring is made of unknown metal with an unknown gem embedded in it. This signet is proof of your performance and contains an identifying script designed to only be readable by the Altmar Empire. Yet even if this ring is primarily a display of status, it is far from just a showpiece. For with great status comes great power. This ring has been customized by its owner to grant him the distributed stats he desires. Stats cannot be redistributed once set. Enchantments: +300 Strength, +300 Agility, +200 Perception, +100 Endurance, +100 Intelligence Requirements: Soulbound

The ring had been godlike when he received it at the beginning of D-grade, but it was only decent by now. Jake did love the design of the thing, though, with its ability to allow him to distribute stats himself rather than just receive something set. Especially as he was getting closer to stat limits, it would be awesome to be able to get the stats he wanted the most.

“That is... a trial ring?” Izil said with some surprise. “An N-signet version too. Did you encounter one of the test dungeons the empire created?”

Jake nodded. “Yep, and I cleared it, getting this in the end. I must admit, I love the design of the thing and would be interested in knowing if this is the kind of thing the Altmar Empire sells?”

“No, these items are usually not sold public-“ Izil began as she seemed to reach a realization. “You said you liked this kind of ring... would you want to have one? One for your current self that is.”

“I am heading off to Nevermore pretty soon and would like one, yes. That is why I asked if I could buy one. If not buy one, then maybe a way to upgrade the one I already have?” Jake tried again.

“Come the ceremony, would the Chosen be satisfied with being offered a similar item?”

“Oh, I hadn’t really thought about that,” Jake admitted. “But sure, why wouldn’t I? As long as I get it before Nevermore, I am good, and I plan on going shortly after the event.”

Izil looked like she had just been given a grand gift as she broke into a massive smile. “I shall relay it.”

Then, she seemed to realize something else and looked at Meira before turning her gaze back to Jake.

“Say... Lord Thayne, you said earlier you want Meira to be free, correct? As in, not a slave?”

Jake nodded, not sure why she asked. “Yep.”

“So...” Izil looked uncomfortable. “Would that mean slaves from the ninety-third universe wouldn’t be a desired gift?”

Elsewhere in the Order of the Malefic Viper, an old mage was hard at work. At the top of a mage tower, an intricate formation lined every inch of every wall. A large sphere of spinning discs marked the center, with a single man standing in front of it, slowly controlling the entire process.

The barrier mage stared at the magical screen as the central processor of the tower worked overtime to analyze everything the formation had gathered. He had it running for over two weeks until it gave the expected response.

“Failed, huh,” the mage nodded, having expected this outcome. “I guess there is no other choice.”

Activating a seal on the processor, the rings stopped spinning as the entire framework began to collapse until it formed a small sphere that hummed with energy. The sphere contained all the gathered data from the masked man’s display of his arcane energy that his current mage tower simply didn’t have the ability to analyze. So he would have to send it somewhere that could.

He took out a formation disc and activated it as the formation formed. The old elf placed the sphere in the middle of the formation as he took out a small crystal and began to infuse it with his message to the head of the academy back at the Altmar Empire. He did not doubt that he would be able to figure out

every detail of the arcane affinity, as even if the head couldn't do it himself, he could escalate the issue to the top. Who knows, if the arcane affinity was interesting enough, a deity might even get involved?

After quickly relaying the information of where he had gotten the data sample, he placed the information crystal next to the sphere and activated the array disc to teleport it all away. The formation hummed to life as suddenly he froze.

The sphere disappeared the second before the formation activated, with the information crystal momentarily vibrating before it got teleported away.

Briefly, the old elf felt odd as his eyes opened in terror.

"Wha-"

The word lingered in the air in the now empty tower, no trace of life remaining.

Chapter 636 - Complicated Gift Plans & Surprise Chosen

"No, slaves would not be a desired gift," Jake said, confused at why Izil instantly jumped to ask about that. Unless...

"Wait, was the Altmar Empire planning on gifting me a bunch of slaves?"

Izil looked a bit uncomfortable at the question before she sighed.

"During these past few years, the Empire has already expanded into the ninety-third universe and blessed quite a few planetary leaders, with many of these planets not only having elves on them. Some have humans, beastfolk, or other enlightened races, and as they cannot be citizens of the Empire, they are usually designated as slaves by default," Izil explained like it wasn't that big of a deal.

"So the Altmar Empire just enslaves everyone who isn't an elf?" Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

Izil seemed to realize she had messed up and bowed apologetically. "I meant no offense, and naturally, if someone like the Chosen was from the Empire, he would be a citizen and hold a high position even if he was human. It is just only elves who get citizenship by default, while the other races will have to earn it through merit."

"Kind of fucked up, isn't it?" Jake grilled her.

"That is how the Altmar Empire has successfully operated for over ninety eras. It has ensured a sense of union within the Empire as we have a homogenous population, and it has allowed us to unite around shared goals. All that we design and all our research can also be better focused on only elves without having to spread our resources thin like some other places," Izil tried to explain. "I am not saying it is perfect, but it is how the Altmar Empire has found a way to survive in the multiverse."

"Not saying it doesn't work, just that it is kind of fucked up," Jake didn't really want to argue. First of all, he didn't know enough about the Altmar Empire to really make judgments, and secondly, he still wanted to stay on good terms with them. Or, at the very least, not publicly antagonize them. He had to remind himself that if he came out as a Chosen, his words could easily be construed as coming from the Viper.

"Anyway, this is a side track," Jake tried to get back on track. "But as I said, no, I don't want any slaves, and I have no need for slaves. Why would the Empire even think I would want them?"

"Well..."

Izil proceeded to explain a thought process Jake hated but honestly couldn't fault too much. The Order of the Malefic Viper's view on slavery was generally one of apathy or support. The Order actively used slaves in many of its practices, worked with factions using them without care, and let their members do as they wanted.

So, the general consensus was that the Chosen would be fine with slaves. Why wouldn't that be the case?

Then there was the issue of how damn hard it was to get gifts for someone you know nothing about. Trying to get him ingredients could be viewed as insulting as that insinuated the Order didn't have those already, and the same proved true with equipment and pretty much any kind of actually useful item.

This left only vanity gifts, unique presents they knew the Order could not provide, and, of course, slaves. The Order was large, yes, but they were still a small faction in the grand scope of the multiverse when it came to pure numbers. Chances are that even if Villy and the other gods who had rejoined the Order were expanding into the new universe, they would at most be able to conquer a few hundred or maybe a thousand planets. With how bloody big a universe was, it was seriously doubtful if any of these planets would be able to teleport any slaves Jake's way, and if they could, then how many would they possibly be able to provide?

So, the factions banked on using their sheer size and scope of influence to provide their gifts. Many also assumed Jake would naturally conquer his planet and then expand from there to take over the galaxy,

colonizing all planets he found worth occupying. For that, he would need people, so people were the best thing they could get him, right?

As Izil explained all this, Jake could see the logic. The sad thing for all these factions was just that the logic didn't really work with Jake. He honestly had no plans on going on a galaxy-wide conquest. Shit, he had barely wanted to become the World Leader of Earth and only did it because he felt forced into the position to avoid everything going to utter shit after the entire Ell'Hakan debacle.

"So, you predict a lot of factions will want to gift me a bunch of slaves?" Jake asked with a sigh.

"Yes, I believe that would be the case," Izil nodded.

"Well... fuck," Jake muttered, wondering what the hell to do when the time came. He kind of wanted to send a multiversal message out telling all the factions to not gift him any damn slaves, but he also wondered what kind of impact that would have.

"Say, what would happen if I rejected any slaves gifted?" Jake asked, already getting the feeling he wouldn't like the answer.

"Hm, in some cases, the giver will simply take them back and put them to use elsewhere--"

Okay, it could be worse.

"-or they will kill them all as a way to preserve the dignity of the faction as they are effectively rejected goods."

And there we go with the fucked up multiversal logic again.

Jake took a deep breath and thought for a bit. His gut reaction was still to just have Villy send out a mass-rejection letter, but would the snake god even comply? Would the factions still decide to kill the slaves? How the hell would they interpret his message? Why the hell did shit have to be so complicated?

He calmed himself down fully as he decided to just wait till the actual ceremony arrived, where he would know exactly what was gonna happen. At that time, he would also have Miranda there to give advice and help handle the situation. For now, he just had to remind himself: keep things simple, and take the complications as they come.

"Alright, I will see what I am gonna do when the time comes," Jake finally said.

Izil nodded before looking at Meira. "I know Meira planned on joining the Order properly, right?"

"That is the plan, yes."

"Wouldn't it be best if she did that before the ceremony? I have a hard time seeing her having any kind of normal enrollment if everyone knows she is the slave or even servant of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper," Izil brought up a very good point.

Jake looked at Meira, wondering if she had tried to stall her joining till after the ceremony to maybe avoid it altogether, but her face told him that wasn't the case. Her face was one of realization, as if she hadn't considered that a potential problem.

"I... should, shouldn't I?" she asked the both of them.

Izil and Jake both nodded in agreement as Meira looked nervous. "What if... what if I don't pass?"

"Meira," Jake said, shaking his head. "If you don't pass, then who the hell has a chance to? I have seen what you work on, and you are pretty damn good at what you do. You may not do that well with poisons, sure, but your potions, flasks, and magic circles are damn impressive."

"But..." Meira tried.

"I must concur; your progress has been unlike anyone else I have met here in the Order. In the beginning, you were far from impressive, and your lack of general knowledge was baffling, but as time passed, you improved at an incredible speed, even learning high-level concepts far earlier than others," Izil agreed, giving her an encouraging smile.

"That's just because of my teacher," Meira tried to write off her own effort.

Izil nodded as she had a thought. "Say, who is your teacher? I had assumed it to be the backer of Lord Thayne, and while the number of surprises I have had today is already overwhelming, please tell me you were not personally taught by the Malefic One?"

"Of course not!" Meira exclaimed.

"Yeah, Duskleaf taught her," Jake nodded.

"Duskleaf... wait, the Grand Elder and leader of the Academy? The one who recently revealed himself as a god?" Izil asked with wide eyes. "Isn't he the disciple of the Malefic Viper?"

"Yep, he is," Jake nodded.

Izil just stared at Meira before she stuttered. "Does... doesn't that make you the disciple of the Grand Elder?"

Meira looked at Izil before vehemently shaking her head. "No! No... the Grand Elder merely taught me a few things because of Lord Thayne. I can in no way claim to be his real student."

"Pretty sure you are," Jake mumbled before yelling towards the ceiling: "Isn't she?"

A few seconds passed as the two elves looked at Jake with confusion, making him feel awkward.

"Duskleaf, stop being shy," Jake said, knowing the god was looking.

"I was not being shy; I just couldn't drop everything on a whim and come here," a voice spoke as the pudgy old alchemist entered the living room, having teleported into the hallway outside with his Sproutleaf Avatar. "But yes, I do think Meira qualifies as my student, considering the amount of time I have spent personally teaching her. As for calling her a disciple, that classification is far more meaningful and requires the active consent of both parties before such a relationship can be formally established."

Izil's eyes opened in disbelief at seeing Duskleaf, and she quickly stood up and bowed toward the god. "This one greets the Grand Elder."

"At ease," he waved her off dismissively. "I just came to clarify that Meira is my student."

"And for me to not make fun of you later for not daring to show up and clarify she is your student," Jake said with a grin.

The old alchemist just shook his head before looking back to Meira. "May as well ask now: after Jake goes public as the Chosen of my master, what do you say to become my official disciple? You practically already are."

"I..."

"Just think about it," Duskleaf said before looking at Jake, giving him a nod of approval. "I did also owe you thanks for winning me a bet. Good job with the succubus."

Jake then saw the alchemist briefly glance at Meira.

"Sleeping with her while out a couple of weeks ago was earlier than either of us had expected."

You bloody bastard...

Jake knew Duskleaf had done it on purpose as he saw Meira stand there frozen as she stared at Jake and Duskleaf both. Her mouth opened for a brief moment before she closed it again, and she adopted a steely look. Izil seemed to notice Meira's reaction and moved a bit closer to her in support as the two seemed to briefly talk telepathically. Jake threw Duskleaf a look as the god spoke to him telepathically too.

"Don't look at me like that; you started this. Besides, the girl needs the motivation to keep progressing even after she joins the Order and regains her freedom. Planting the seed of expectation that she needs to attain a status making her able to approach you is a good way to make that happen," Duskleaf explained. "That it will create some drama for you is just a bonus."

"Pretty sure we already gave her enough motivation before this," Jake countered, not buying it.

"One can always have more."

"I believe I have said all there is to say," Duskleaf said as he disappeared from the living room, leaving Jake and the two elves. Jake wanted to curse him out more for just bailing after having the last word like that, but he held it in as he just stared at where Duskleaf had been.

"Lord Thayne, would it be fine if we also took our leave?" Meira asked a few seconds after the god was gone. "I want to no longer delay joining the Order and getting it done."

"I, too, should attend to business relating to the ceremony and relay the information you have given me today," Izil added as she bowed. "I thank the Chosen for trusting me with this task and will do my best not to disappoint."

Jake could not exactly tell them to stay and was more than fine with them leaving. He was surprised neither of them brought up what Duskleaf had said, and he wasn't sure if their silence was a good or a bad thing.

"Alright, you two take care," Jake nodded.

Meira proceeded to escort Izil to the teleportation gate, but when they got there, they both teleported away, leaving Jake confused. Was she planning on joining the Order here and now or what?

Shaking his head, Jake tried not to think about it as he headed back to his lab to do something he at least understood:

Torturing mushrooms to make poisons.

Miranda was rather used to meetings if she said so herself. She had acted as the head of the World Council ever since its inception and was used to dealing with all sorts of factions leaders who repeatedly hounded her and the rest of the council.

Never had she felt fazed during all these meetings. But... this time was different.

She found herself sitting in the heartlands of the Verdant Lagoon while using her legendary dream skill. Out of pretty much everyone on Earth that was D-grade or above, Miranda guessed she was the one who slept the most due to this skill and its ability to dilate time while she slept. It allowed her to catch up when there weren't enough hours in her day and to keep practicing magic while not failing to live up to her responsibilities.

Yet today, she found herself within the Verdant Lagoon, not to practice magic or catch up on tasks or any of the other things Miranda usually did there. Instead, she found herself surrounded by four individuals who all surpassed her in every way imaginable.

Three of them were the Verdant Witches themselves, Godqueens, and high-level leaders of the Order of the Malefic Viper. The fourth was someone Miranda had only encountered once before during a prior visit to the lagoon: the Hall Master and leader of the mortal part of the Order, Viridia. A late-stage S-grade who was expected to reach demi-god status within not that long, as the Verdant Witches had recently taken her in as a disciple. There were even rumors she would soon become their Chosen.

As for why these five women had gathered? Well, what else could it be but because of Jake.

"I have confirmation from the Altmar Empire, Endless Empire, sixteen major tribes of the beastfolk, the Risen, and--"

"Tell us who has not yet answered that they will attend. Of the major factions," the first of the three sisters asked Viridia, who had been explaining who would attend the event.

"Notably absent is the Holy Church, but even more surprisingly, Valhal has been silent," Viridia explained, shaking her head. "The Risen did also raise a ruckus over the many vampires who have so openly shown themselves and joined the Order, but I do not believe they will cause any trouble."

The second of the three sisters nodded and smiled. "Still, it will be quite the event. When was the last time the Automata Legion and the Endless Empire existed within the same space without it resulting in bloodshed?"

"It could still end in bloodshed," the third sister chimed in.

"Which would definitely make it more entertaining," the second one grinned.

Miranda just listened in as the four far more powerful women discussed the upcoming event even more. She wondered why she was even asked to be there as one of the three sisters finally addressed her.

"How about you, little sis? You got confirmation from those blessed by the two Primordials, didn't you?"

She still felt uncomfortable with being called little sis but still nodded without showing her discomfort. "I have indeed. Moreover, I have ensured that Sandy will also join us for the event."

The four witches looked at her weirdly before one of the three gods tilted her head. "Who is Sandy? Oh, is it the Unique Lifeform!?"

"No, the Unique Lifeform is known as the Fallen King," Miranda shook her head. "Sandy is the Chosen of the Lord Protector."

Thee women's gazes stayed on her as the third witch spoke in a confused tone.

"... the Lord Protector has a Chosen?"

"...Yes?" Miranda asked equally confused.

"I had not heard this," the first of the witches said as she tapped her finger on her chin. "Oh well, how fun! The more, the merrier, right? Two Chosens revealed in one day!"

Miranda stared back at them as she seriously questioned:

This entire ceremony was going to be a shitshow, wasn't it?

Chapter 637 - Lodge Meeting

Two weeks wasn't a long time in the grand scheme of things, and before Jake knew it, the fated day had arrived. He was honestly surprised at how little he had to do during this time, with no one really bothering him besides Miranda giving him the occasional reminder.

He wasn't dragged out for a shopping trip for new clothes or even informed how things would proceed. Jake also actively tried not to ask as he instead tried to focus all his attention on just doing alchemy while not thinking about the ceremony. Because Jake really wanted to not think about it.

Jake couldn't lie... he was nervous. With every passing day, his nervousness grew, but the lack of knowledge of how the ceremony would work was honestly calming. It gave him the feeling that there weren't that many expectations of him, and the only thing he had asked Villy was if he was expected to do a speech or something. For this, the Viper had luckily said no, that there would be no need for him to talk publicly during the big announcement part of the ceremony.

As for the exclusive after-party that would follow the ceremony... Villy said Jake would probably have to say something there. What this exclusive after-party was all about, he didn't know, but he assumed this was where they would discuss the details of what to do with his ability to create True Royals and whatnot.

Ah, but one big thing did happen during these two weeks.

Meira returned three days after she left with Izil, her very own gold token in hand as she successfully passed the test and became an official member of the Order of the Malefic Viper. Izil had joined her when they returned, and the three of them had a small celebration where nothing of note really happened.

In retrospect, Meira joining really had just been a formality. There was no way she couldn't pass, and the only reason she got a gold token was her limited scope of knowledge when it came to alchemy, as she ultimately hadn't been taught for that long. Jake estimated she would get a black token within a few years max, though she still had a bit to go. She had got a pretty low-level version of the gold token, after all.

Jake did consider how close he was to a dark green token until he remembered it didn't matter for shit. His current token was already a custom-made one by the Viper, and he didn't doubt the snake god wanted to do some more special stuff with it after the ceremony. Maybe even give him some special Chosen token.

With a gold token, Meira had also earned her own residence but hadn't even visited it once. Jake also hadn't brought it up, as his promise of allowing her to stay was naturally in effect. This meant that nothing had really changed despite her joining. Their day-to-day was the same as before, and any discussions of what Meira planned on doing in the long term were shelved till after the ceremony.

Jake also made nice progress over these two weeks and managed to create his Sleeping Night Toxin and, in general, just stocked up on poisons and potions both. The plan he had agreed on with the Sword Saint, Sylphie, and the King was that they would head off to Nevermore pretty much right after the ceremony without returning to Earth.

While it wasn't entirely unexpected, this did end up netting Jake one final level before it was Nevermore time.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 206 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

This was under the assumption the ceremony would not randomly give him levels, but he really hoped it wouldn't. He already felt like level 204 in his race level was higher than he wanted it to be.

Packing up potions and poisons in his lab, he took a final count of how much he had before he prepared to head back to Earth. There were still twenty or so hours before the ceremony would begin, but he wanted to be back there with time to spare. It would also be nice to catch up with everyone before they

were thrown into political turmoil while also discussing their approach to recruiting a fifth party member.

Jake needed to be the one to fetch them as teleporting to another universe was still considered incredibly difficult, and as far as Jake knew, no one Jake knew on Earth was capable of doing it anywhere close to as easily as him. At least not if they wanted it to be a two-way kind of thing. Hence why he would just bring them along.

Before he returned to Earth, Jake went to the lawn outside of the mansion to check up on one of the main characters of today's event.

"How are things?" he asked as he walked over to Vesperia.

Vesperia was currently cradling a small hairy bee-like creature as she rocked it back and forth. She smiled and looked up at Jake as he arrived. "It is going well; I am making fast progress toward spawning a proper Bee Hive Queen."

The bumblebee-like creature looked up at Jake with big cute eyes. He barely had time to regard it as Vesperia waved her hands, and the entire creature disappeared. "I can feel them, you know. The call of the other True Royals. They know I am here, and so do I know they have appeared within the territory controlled by the Order."

"Looking forward to going home?" Jake smiled.

Vesperia looked at him for a while before sighing. "My feelings on the matter are complicated, but yes, a part of me certainly does look forward to returning to the Endless Empire. You joining me would be optimal, but I am fully aware that is not a possibility."

Jake sat down on the grass in front of her. "You know, you could always come to visit."

"That could prove... difficult."

"Well, then I might just end up being the one visiting the Endless Empire," Jake smiled at her. "If not, then don't worry too much; I already talked to the Viper about giving you something so we can stay in contact."

Vesperia looked surprised before giggling. "Funny, I had considered asking the other True Royals for something similar, though I assume they will want to gift you such an item either way so they can contact you, and you can contact them if you ever want to talk."

"Great minds think alike," Jake grinned.

The two of them stayed there a bit longer, just chatting. Vesperia was very independent, so even if Jake had wanted to talk to her during these last few weeks, she had been busy working on her own tasks or studying her Lineage knowledge.

Soon, Jake had to leave and go get the others. Vesperia wasn't sure if she could come along, and Jake wasn't gonna risk anything going wrong by trying to bring her. Besides, he would have everyone go to his mansions before the ceremony, so they could all meet her then.

Going back to his lab, Jake activated the teleportation array as he was swept through the void. The next time he opened his eyes, the familiar scenery of his underground laboratory back in Haven met him, and his sphere spread out.

He saw that the lodge above was already filled with people. Miranda, the Fallen King, Sylphie, and the Sword Saint were all there, which had been expected. However, he had not expected to see a few other familiar faces. His little brother, Caleb, was also there drinking tea and chatting, with Maria, the archer blessed by Gwyndyr, lounging in a chair, listening to them all talking.

It truly was a meeting of powerhouses. The only one missing was Carmen, but Jake understood that some weird shit was going on between Valhal and the Order behind the scenes.

Making his way up the tunnel, he briefly stopped by to check in on Rick and the small trolls. Poking his head in, he saw they were all in a big pile sleeping, making him not want to disturb their quality family time. He did see that Rick was pretty damn close to C-grade, though. Thus, Jake briefly used his privilege as World Leader to make sure Rick could stay in human lands even after evolving. Jake wasn't sure if he would be thrown out, but better safe than sorry.

Using One Step his way up the tunnel and into his valley, he reached it in seconds as he also became aware of another person who had arrived. Sandy was floating in the air several kilometers above the lodge, seemingly just swimming ground through the air impatiently.

"Oh! Hey, you're back!" Sandy yelled at him telepathically the moment they noticed him.

“Long time no see,” Jake responded to the Cosmic Genesis Worm. He also failed to hold himself back from using Identify.

[Juvenile Cosmic Genesis Worm – lvl 219]

“You’re not going to Nevermore?” Jake asked, seeing Sandy had gotten all the way to 219. He also noticed how he couldn’t see the Blessing despite trying to and obviously feeling it was there. Weird.

“Why would I? That place sucks! It’s all about fighting and thinking and stuff, with nothing good to eat. Yuck!” Sandy clearly disliked the idea. “Way better to just stay here and eat or go somewhere else to eat. Any place with good stuff to eat will do.”

“Fair, fair,” Jake answered. He wasn’t that surprised Sandy did not want to go considering what Nevermore was. It was a place focused primarily on combat and clearing trials, while Sandy was just a glutton that wanted to eat anything they came across.

“You ready for the big ceremony?” he followed up.

“Wait, I have to prepare anything?”

“I... don’t think so?”

“Then why would I not be ready?” Sandy scoffed. “Oh, also.... I was thinking...”

Jake smiled as he took out a large glowing rock and tossed it toward Sandy. It was sucked up instantly as Sandy quivered slightly. “Yummy! What was it?”

“A remnant of when I was experimenting with my arcane affinity,” Jake smiled. “I will head down and talk to the others now. Join us whenever you feel like it.”

He didn’t bother asking why Sandy wasn’t down there already. Trying to understand that worm was beyond both mortal and divine comprehension.

Sandy gave him another wiggle as Jake headed down. Halfway, a bird flew up and circled around him a few times.

“Glad to see you too,” Jake said as Sylphie ended up flying into his chest, where he cradled her like the little bird she was. A bird higher-leveled than himself but lower than Jake would have expected.

[Juvenile Sylphian Hawk – lvl 206 – Divine Blessing of Stormild]

Jake actually felt relieved she had not gone higher. It showed she had controlled herself and instead focused on improving her abilities over simply leveling up.

Landing on the ground outside of his lodge, he ascended the steps and entered.

“Finally, he arrives,” Jake heard the Fallen King first thing upon entering as everyone turned to him. Jake threw the Unique Lifeform a look. He hadn’t leveled that much either compared to what he could have.

[Fallen King – lvl 205]

“Well, sorry if you expected me earlier, I was busy creating miracles and shaking up the multiversal status-quo,” Jake said without feeling the least bit apologetic. He did a quick Identify around the room and got a feel for everyone present. First was the Sword Saint.

[Human – lvl 201 – Divine Blessing of Aeon Clok]

Level 201 made him the lowest of their group, but based on the man’s aura, Jake was certain his evolution had been quite something. Jake nearly wanted to challenge him to a duel there and then, but he held himself back and just gave the old man a nod.

Next was Maria, his fellow archer.

[Human – lvl 203 – Divine Blessing of Gwyndyr]

He also only gave her a nod, with her giving a quick greeting in response. They had an entire day to talk and could get to it after this.

Finally, he checked the final C-grade present: his little brother.

[Human – lvl 205 – Divine Blessing of Umbra]

“You surpassed me in level, you little shit,” Jake said immediately once he had Identified the Judge of the Court of Shadows.

“How embarrassing for you,” Caleb gave him a genuine smile. “I wish I could say I had been working hard, but the truth is that I struggle to hold myself back from progressing further. Ah, to suffer from success.”

“Your punchability is increasing with every passing second,” Jake said as he walked over.

“Considering your low level, is that even a threat?” Caleb grinned wider than before.

Jake just shook his head and pulled the little bastard into a hug before he could react.

“Couldn’t dodge that,” Jake said.

“Or maybe I allowed you the honor of landing the first attack,” his brother said, returning the hug.
“Good to see you again. The others back home also told me to say hi from them.”

Jake nodded as he pulled away. "Thank them for me next time you head back to Skyggen."

"That will be a while," Caleb shook his head. "I am heading to the Order now for your little ceremony, but afterward, I am off to a larger facility run by the Court of Shadows before I, too, will go to Nevermore."

"I thought you would go with those two assassin pals of yours... what were they called again?"

"Nadia and Matteo, and they are already way ahead of me," Caleb waved him off. "They left nearly a month ago, right after evolving to do training at this facility. I only stayed back on Earth because of your ceremony."

"Sorry?" Jake scratched his head.

"You should be," Caleb teased him.

"Now, while I am all for this happy family reunion, perhaps we should actually address why we are here?" the Fallen King interrupted them.

"Probably should," Jake nodded in acknowledgment. He looked around the lodge and smiled. "Thanks for coming, everyone."

He then turned his attention to Maria. "I must admit, I didn't know you would be here? No offense."

"None taken," she said. "I did tell you I would probably go to Haven at some point, didn't I? Well, here I am."

"Sad to no longer be working with the Holy Church?" Jake asked, only semi-teasing.

"Fuck no, they were a nightmare," Maria laughed. "So many bullshit rules and more than half of my party were bloody fanatics with only that Bertram guy not being insane. The moment that other Chosen arrived and began to stir shit up, the Church wanted me to remain with them and fight the Risen, but luckily the Crimson Flame knows how to make contracts, so I managed to bail before shit got bad."

"What did you do instead?"

Maria just smirked. "What else would I do than go hunt? I have quite the skills to pass long distances, so I headed to another continent and leveled up, only stopping once I evolved and made my way back here. Then I got word of this entire ceremony from my Patron and was tasked with asking if I could attend."

"Something I already approved," Miranda added.

"No complaints from me," Jake shrugged.

“I would complain, but this entire ordeal got my Blessing upgraded to Divine, so I won’t,” Maria said, leaning back in her chair.

Jake nodded as he looked at Miranda. “Should we get started?”

“Just a bit; we are waiting for one more person. I already called him once I noticed your arrival, and he should be here shortly,” Miranda answered.

“Who?” Jake asked, but just then, a figure entered his sphere. It took him a bit to recognize who it was, and the person practically sprinted into the valley, so when Jake turned his head and looked out the open door, he was already close.

Jake saw the familiar man as his eyes opened wide.

“This lowly one greets the honored Chosen of the Malefic Viper,” the sculptor named Felix kneeled and pressed his head to the ground just below the steps leading into the lodge. His eyes burned with fanaticism as he looked up and stared at Jake, but he also failed to hold back his enthusiasm when he glanced at Sylphie and the Sword Saint.

Interestingly enough, he didn’t spare Maria, Sandy, or even Caleb a single glance despite them all also having Divine Blessings from incredibly powerful gods. Truly just a fanatic from the Primordial Church. Jake felt the guy wasn’t particularly strong, but still threw him an Identify, and...

[Human – lvl 242 – Divine Blessing of the Eternal Servant]

What the actual fuck?

His level was far beyond anything Jake could have expected, yet he felt bloody weak. Miranda was still level 199, yet Jake felt she could beat the guy in a fight if they fought. As for why he was here...

"It has indeed been a while," Jake nodded. Last he heard, the guy had been working on some secret sculpture and had been so obsessed that Miranda needed to hire others to make statues for the temple.

"Why is he here?" Jake sent Miranda telepathically as he kept an outward smile toward Felix.

"Because he will also join the ceremony... and apparently, he has quite the present for you," Miranda said. "I asked the Verdant Witches, and they said to let him come."

Jake wanted to sigh but held himself back as he just smiled at the sculptor, wondering what kind of gift the guy could have. Well, considering Felix was a sculptor, it would probably be a sculpture, right? Jake remembered the guy wanted him to help design one dedicated to the Viper, but they never actually got around to that, did they?

I did make some random constructs with fun ideas, but... nah, that would be dumb.

No fucking way he had actually made one of those, right?

Chapter 638 - Towards The Order They Go

Jake sat in the chair as he tried really fucking hard to ignore the eyes drilling into the back of his neck from the fanatic sculptor. The man was relentless, and it took Jake several minutes to convince the guy that sitting in a chair with a Chosen in his presence was acceptable conduct. Could he have just let the guy continue kneeling or kowtowing throughout their entire meeting? Yes, he could have done that, but he reckoned that would be far more awkward.

After the ordeal with Felix, they moved inside and took their seats for Miranda to brief them on how the event would function. Sandy had also been convinced to shrink down and was now lounging on the floor, looking to not have a single care in the world.

Miranda was the one in charge of this briefing as she had been one of the people helping organize it. Well, at least that is what it said on paper, but in reality, Miranda had not been that involved. She had just been in the room as the decisions were made, making her the most knowledgeable on what would happen.

"The announcement will consist of a few different parts. Firstly we will have the opening where the Order of the Malefic Viper Hall Master, Viridia, will welcome everyone. This first part will be broadcast throughout much of the multiverse and be recorded, so make sure to be on your best behavior here. During this opening, Viridia will introduce Jake and Sandy to the world," Miranda explained as she continued.

"After Viridia is done, the Malefic Viper himself will take the stage and speak a few words. This is also where the True Royal is brought up, and... Vesperia was it?"

Jake nodded.

"- Vesperia will reveal herself to the multiverse and allow all to see she is indeed a True Royal. Mind you, this entire opening announcement is primarily designed for mortals and is a public display by both the

Order and all factions who participate. There will be seating for invited guests, but expect no gods to show themselves, only mortal representatives. Gods will also be there, but they will remain hidden. If they didn't, the mortals would be unable to function in their presence. You know, that is how it works for everyone else – the presences of gods utterly suppress them,” Miranda said, throwing glances around the room.

Jake, the Fallen King, Sylphie, Caleb, and Sandy were all borderline immune to presences due to Jake's Bloodline having influenced them all, either through their link to him or, in his brother's case, being exposed to Jake's presence growing up. Thinking about it, Jake did find this a bit funny, and Jake considered how the Sword Saint dealt with gods.

“You will all be at the front during this part of the ceremony. Your roles are pretty much just to flare out your Divine Blessings to communicate the close relationship between your Patrons and the Malefic One. In other words, it is all politics, and none of you will be expected to speak or do anything. Not even you, Jake. Your role will also just be to stand there and look menacing,” Miranda said. “Something that should come naturally to you. We even discussed that flaring a bit of your presence from your Bloodline may be a good idea. Even if you don't, then the fact that you can remain standing when the Malefic One descends should leave quite the impression.”

“Why should I participate in this pointless ritual?” the Fallen King asked with a disinterested voice. “This seems entirely meaningless from my poi-”

“Have some patience; that is the next part,” Miranda said politely yet sternly, giving the King a disapproving stare that actually made the Unique Lifeform back down.

“As I was getting to, then the next portion will pertain to Jake heading off to Nevermore and announcing your party members. This also gives us the excuse to have Jake sitting with the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Lord Noboru, which will, in turn, also communicate the close relationship between Jake and two individuals with Divine Blessings from other Primordials. As for you, Fallen King, I hope I don't have to mention that your presence will give credence to Jake's power since you are willing to go do Nevermore with him?” Miranda asked the Unique Lifeform.

The Fallen King nodded without further debating the issue.

"Great. After the announcement, we will have the after-party. This is a far more limited space where pretty much only VIPs will be able to enter and where most of the actual politics will be going on. No recording will be happening here, and while Jake is still the main character, it is as much a diplomatic event as it is a celebration of him. Gifts will be handed to Jake during this part, too, though most presents will not be given to him directly as that would just be too time-consuming. Only larger factions or pre-curated items will be shown here. Do note that some gods may appear, but they will likely only do so briefly before leaving in order to not squash everyone present with their auras."

Everyone nodded along to her explanation. Besides Sylphie and Sandy, that is. Both looked to be snoozing.

"Following the after-party, we have the after-after-party. I say we, but in all honesty, I expect only Jake to participate in this portion while the rest of us will remain at the other party. This will effectively just be a meeting of gods discussing everything related to the True Royal and the importance of her emergence. I would recommend for everyone else to just enjoy this time and maybe make some connections with other major factions as representatives will be present," Miranda said with a smile.

"Excuse me, fellow servant of the Chosen One, would it not be best to deliver the Primordial Church's magnificent present to the Malefic One and his honored Chosen when most people are here to see its splendor?" Felix asked Miranda.

"It is not by my will or decision when or where presents will be accepted, but solely decided by the Malefic One," Miranda masterfully deflected. Felix did not even try to comment but just nodded enthusiastically, not daring to argue when the Malefic One had decided how things would proceed.

"Are there any other questions? I hope that everything which happens will be rather self-explanatory and you won't have to actively participate much," Miranda asked the room.

"Is it during this after-party we can expect potential candidates for the Nevermore team to appear?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Ah, yes, that is where I would assume they would show up. Doing it like that is certainly better than allowing any-and-all to approach you, as only those with some level of status will be able to participate," Miranda nodded.

"Ree?" Sylphie also inquired, only semi-awake.

Miranda just stared at the bird for a few seconds before Jake translated. "She asks if there will be snacks."

Sandy also finally roused from their sleep, practically vibrating from the mention of food.

"Yes, there will be food provided at the after-party," Miranda nodded.

"Lots of snacks?" Sandy followed up.

"I doubt the Order would be willing to let their guests leave unsatisfied, so there should be plenty, even if a few gluttons take part."

Sandy seemed satisfied with the answer and rolled onto their back again for another quick nap. Sylphie was also happy and made herself more comfortable in Jake's arms before also taking a rest.

Miranda had nothing more to share about what would happen, so the topic shifted to the kind of party member they sought.

"Some kind of support-type member would surely be the most beneficial? It will allow us to recover faster after every bout, and if we find one powerful enough, their enhancements should assist us and heighten our combat power. This is not mentioning the safety a healer will bring to the group," the Sword Saint voiced his thoughts.

"Hm, that actually got me thinking; who will take the role of tank for our party? Our current setup doesn't feel very balanced," Jake asked.

They all looked confused at him for a moment before the Sword Saint spoke. "I... am uncertain why you would want anyone to take the role of mechanized infantry, but would you not fulfill the role closest to a tank considering your powerful ranged firepower?"

Miranda failed to hold back a giggle as Caleb face-palmed off to the side. Maria also gave Jake an amused grin.

"It is the lingo of us young folk," Caleb explained. "A tank is usually the one who absorbs the most damage and protects the other party members from harm by keeping the attention of the opponents on them, allowing everyone else to attack more safely."

"What a foolish question, then," the Fallen King commented. "While we can attempt to limit the movement of our opponents, none of us are specialized guardians with supportive skills allowing us to defend others. Without these, why would an opponent with even a modicum of intelligence attack the most durable individual of a group?"

"Wow, geez, sorry for asking who would take the frontline," Jake muttered.

"Whoever our opponent identifies as its primary target will be the frontline. What we can discuss is if some of us should take more supportive roles. My barriers and defensive means are potent, and I can disrupt a foe at the cost of dealing damage, but that strikes me as something decided on a pure case-by-case basis," the Fallen King argued.

"I think a better question is who the target won't be," the Sword Saint added. "From what I remember, you are quite the elusive target, Jake, and the Sylphian Hawk also strikes me as a difficult one to pin down. So, by process of elimination, most will likely go for the Fallen King or me. Well, it will be us... or our final member. What I ultimately mean is that this final member will need to be someone that can handle the pressure exerted on them without a lot of outside assistance. We must recognize that while our individual prowess is high, we are all ultimately individual fighters, and our Paths are not balanced around fighting in groups."

"Only partly so, but we can discuss more once we know our final member," the King said, insinuating he maybe did have some kind of supportive skills or buffs to hand out. Which would make sense, considering his name.

"Will the everyday life affinity healing work on you?" Jake asked the Fallen King something that had been bothering him for a while, considering the rather unique circumstances of the Unique Lifeform.

"Yes, partially. It will be able to restore the body I have created, which will result in me not having to waste mana doing so," the Fallen King answered. "If you are asking if I have any Vitality, then the answer is no. I am a wholly magical being."

Jake nodded as he looked down at the bird he was holding. Considering her existence as a semi-elemental, he wondered how things worked for her. He shook her a bit, making her look annoyed as she also answered.

"Ree, ree, ree, ree," Sylphie explained articulately.

"How peculiar, the Sword Saint's assessment of you as an elusive foe truly proves correct. Such a minuscule health pool compared to mana, made useless as your body is but one state of being... truly interesting. I must admit, I had questioned your inclusion in our group, but it appears there is more to you than your immediate appearance reveals," the King nodded.

"Ree!"

"That was a compliment," the King waved her off.

Miranda stared at the two for a few seconds as she sighed. "You seriously understand what Sylphie says?"

"Naturally," the King said.

"Duh, even if the bird is a bit dumb, she is perfectly understandable," Sandy also chimed in.

This got another angry screech from Sylphie and a worm tauntingly wiggling in response.

"If it helps calm you, then I, too, do not understand the Sylphian Hawk," the Sword Saint said as he smiled at Miranda.

"Me neither," Caleb shrugged.

"I shall pray that I will gain comprehension of her divine teachings," Felix said as he bowed toward the half-asleep bird.

"Humans usually don't understand beasts. It's just this freak that does," Maria said, motioning towards Jake.

"Hurtful," Jake said, faking emotional damage.

Miranda shook her head and changed the topic again. "Anyway, rather than sit around more, how about we move our venue from this lodge to Jake's other home?"

"Probably should," Jake said. "Let's be off, then. We will have to go there from the Grand Mangrove River, as my personal magic circle isn't really suited for groups."

He got nods all around, and after kicking Sandy to get them moving, he had everyone follow him to the teleporter in Haven. A few teleports later, they arrived in the Grand Mangrove River town and quickly made their way down to the magic circle hidden beneath the ground, all while making small talk.

"Hey there," Jake greeted the massive old snake that came to greet them at the entrance.

"Welcome, Chosen of the Malefic One, Chosen of the Lord Protector, and their entourage," the old snake said in a respectful tone. "The teleporter is prepared for all of you, and I wish you all a swift and pleasant journey. Though, if I may ask... how is the young mistress doing?"

"Scarlett is doing fine," Jake smiled. "I had a meeting with her recently, and she seems to be fitting in nicely with the Order. Even made a few friends."

There was no need to mention the part about the Azure Dragonkin. That would only make Old Grumpy nervous.

"That is good to hear," the old snake said with relief. "I shall take my leave, then. I wish all of you fortune."

Jake and the others thanked the snake as he led them toward the center circle. Soon, they reached it, and Jake saw no need to delay. But before going...

"Ah, but just one tip," Jake said as he stood in the center of the teleportation circle and motioned for the others to join him. "Keep your eyes closed and senses limited during the entire teleportation process."

"You think I will be disorientated from a simple teleportation to another universe?" the King asked, offended as he floated onto the circle.

"No, not really, it isn't the teleport I am warning you about," Jake shook his head. "It's just that the first time I left the ninety-third universe, I ended up bumping into an ancient eldritch Void God with a body made of endless eyes and power rivaling that of a Primordial. All I am saying is that seeing a creature outside the realm of mortal understanding kinda fucked with my head for a bit and was a thoroughly unrecommended experience."

The King was silent for a bit before simply nodding. "Very well, I shall take your advice into consideration."

"Good choice," Jake said, doing all he could to not reveal he was just fucking with all of them. Oras probably wasn't gonna sweep them up, and even if he wanted to, Jake had a feeling Villy would make sure nothing happened. He also wasn't clear on if everyone would survive the encounter with Oras, as he had felt his soul be in less than stellar condition after just seeing that fucked-up being for a few seconds.

Now slightly more afraid of what lurks within the void, everyone else followed after the King, their level of nervousness significantly higher than it had been only a few minutes ago. Jake threw the old space

snake a nod of acknowledgment as he activated the teleporter, and the group disappeared from the ninety-third universe.

Chapter 639 - The Power Of Jinxing

Meira felt intimidated as she sat in the living room next to the extremely tall winged woman. To make it worse, the woman occasionally looked at her with eyes making her appear far older than she actually was. Her entire demeanor reminded her a bit of one of the old matriarchs she once saw visit her home village. Thinking about the place that used to be her home, she felt a bit down but quickly steeled herself.

Be patient... Izil already said things are stable there.

Izil had helped Meira check in on her old village, and luckily nothing seemed to have changed back there besides who controlled the land and who the taxes were paid to. This made her think that her family members back there should still be safe, as while life hadn't been easy back then, it hadn't been that dangerous either.

As for her father... he hadn't made it. Meira discovered he had died before Meira even became Lord Thayne's slave, as he had been bought and used by some alchemist in an experiment. Hearing that had given Meira an odd feeling, as while she was sad, she wasn't as sad as she probably should have been. She couldn't lie; her father had never been a good man and never viewed her as more than an asset he could use to hopefully further his own status. This was also why he had been so insistent in selling her off to the young master of the Brimstone Conglomerate the day they had been captured.

His death had actually been a relief for her, as if he was still alive, she would have felt responsible for trying to help him. Helping would have meant asking Lord Thayne for assistance, which she really hadn't wanted to do, especially not in her early days working for him. Even now, she felt uncomfortable asking for help with anything she thought was selfish, even if she knew she shouldn't. She knew her mentality was not the same as those around her, and she was still learning, with Izil helping her as much as she could.

After spending so much time around Lord Thayne and Grand Elder Duskleaf, two people with statuses so much superior to her it wasn't even funny, she learned that her father's mentality wasn't one everyone had. Lord Thayne at least seemed to genuinely care about her as more than just an asset. In fact, he wanted to not have her be his asset to an almost hurtful degree.

Which did make it a bit funny that he, in his nervousness for the upcoming ceremony, had completely forgotten to strip her of her status as a slave even after she had joined the Order. Something she certainly wouldn't be the one to bring up herself. Meira smiled as she remembered her small celebration with Lord Thayne and Izil after joining the Order. It was her first time ever being celebrated, and it felt nice.

"You either wear your emotions on your sleeves, or you are terrible at hiding your inner thoughts," Vesperia said with a smile as she looked at Meira.

Meira blushed as the Vespernat Hive Queen looked down at her with amused eyes.

"You act as if you don't also show emotions," she tried to shoot back. Meira had seen the two of them talk, and she knew the Hive Queen was blunt and honest in most cases.

"I display my emotions intentionally; that is the difference. I naturally cannot hide them all the time, but I actively attempt to control them when I am around people I don't want to be open with. I have to with my position, as making half-hearted decisions based on how I feel or allowing others to manipulate me emotionally would be ill-advised," Vesperia explained with a smile.

"I never learned any of that..." Meira complained, knowing it was a problem. She knew she sucked at stuff like this, which was also partly why Nella had been able to treat her like she had for so long. Meira had genuinely believed she was her friend until the moment she realized it wasn't so.

"Do you..." Meira began as she built some courage. "Do you think Lord Thayne will ever... you know?"

Vesperia looked at Meira for a few seconds before sighing and giving her a comforting smile.

"You like him, I do believe that. Just don't confuse gratitude and admiration with love and adoration, or the outcome will only be needless hurt," Vesperia said in a motherly tone. "He cares for you, but you have a long way to go before your emotions are ones he can respond to in the way you hope. You want fundamentally different things as you are now, and I don't see him changing. So if you want to pursue more than you have now, you must change. Evolve, not only in power but as a person. Become someone not just looking up to him and wanting to prove herself useful, but a person who can stand on their own, for what you are now is not what he wants."

Meira fell silent after hearing these words as she clenched her fists. "How... how would I do that?"

"That, little elf, I cannot answer," Vesperia smiled as she patted Meira on the head. "But what I do know is that you will need to find a reason within yourself to change. If you want to change only for others, you will never truly realize your goals and walk a short and fruitless Path. Then again, maybe you will prove me wrong."

Meira was about to ask more when she heard something outside the mansion. She looked out one of the large windows and saw an entire group had appeared on the lawn outside, and from the looks of it, they were all yelling about something while several had blood coming out of their eyes with a weird tree-like creature lying prone on the ground, seemingly unconscious.

So, Jake made a joke. A pretty good joke, if he had to say so himself, teasing them about the evil eldritch beings dwelling in the void between universes. Now, Jake did know that words held power and whatnot, but how the hell could he have known that the power of jinxing was that powerful?

Things had gone as usual during the teleportation until suddenly, he felt something was wrong. The very next second, Jake felt himself floating in the middle of the void, surrounded by everyone else. They also all seemed to notice something was wrong as they stupidly opened their eyes and looked around, only for the world in front of them to distort and reveal what looked like... a hairy cube?

Jake was assaulted by a headache as the cube vibrated and multiplied before suddenly, a sea of eyes also swept in and made the picture even more fucked up. He wasn't exactly sure what the hell was going on, but his instincts were screamed at him as he felt not just one but two presences at once.

Because what was better than one eldritch Void God? Two eldritch Void Gods.

"Chosen by the Keeper of Forbidden Knowledge, I congratulate you, and I offer a rightful gift as forepromised," Jake heard what he believed to be Oras speak.

"Human of Origins Lost. Beings of Paths Once Untraveled. Seek thy meaning, realize and ascend," a second and even more distorted voice spoke into all of their heads.

Then, the cubes just disappeared as if they had never been there, leaving only the flood of eyes. Then, a small orb appeared before Jake's eyes, and he instinctively reached out and grabbed it before they were once more thrown through the void and appeared back on his lawn within the Order of the Malefic Viper.

"What the actual fuck was that!" Maria yelled as blood dripped from her eyes.

"I... I don't..." Miranda muttered as she looked completely out of it.

"Void tastes bad," Sandy said in a tone that could be perfectly communicated with a sad smiley.

"That felt so wrong," Caleb shook his head as his body gave off crackles of black lightning. "So, so wrong."

The Sword Saint was silent as his eyes were still red with tears of blood coming out. He seemed calm, but inwardly, Jake didn't doubt he was affected.

Only two people besides Jake came out okay. The first was Sylphie, who had been asleep, and the other was Felix, who still stood with his eyes closed, seemingly entirely unaware of the outside world. It took Jake poking him before he woke up, proud that he had followed the directive of the Chosen to seal off his senses so perfectly.

Last but not least was the one who was worst off: the Fallen King. The second they appeared, he had just fallen over, and Jake felt he was unconscious. Jake had no idea why he had been struck so hard, but he clearly had been.

As the others loudly discussed and yelled to calm themselves down, Jake checked out the item in his hand given by Oras. It felt like a glass marble and was smaller than the tip of his fingers, yet he felt an odd and dangerous energy from it. Not knowing if it would even work, Jake used Identify on it.

[Vision of Oras (?)] – A small bead containing Records and energy created through unknown means by the Void God, Oras. This item has been bound to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, Jake Thayne, and cannot be used by anyone else. Consuming this bead grants +59783 Perception. Directly consuming this item may cause adverse effects. Beware, staring into the small bead may grant you visions of the void.

Jake just stared dumbstruck at the ludicrous description for several seconds, especially the part about consuming it for Perception. Nearly sixty fucking thousand Perception for eating it? That was nearly three times as much Perception as he had. Not that Jake could even consider eating it for even a second. The level of danger he felt from it was intense, making him fully aware it would be a death sentence. Also, with the stat cap from consumables, it wouldn't even help him much. Then there was the part about staring at it, and-

"Lick it..."

The voice of a snake god whispered in Jake's ear.

He thought he had heard wrong as it came again.

"Come on... just lick it. You know you want to."

"Villy, what the fuck is this thing?" Jake asked the snake god.

"Shh... just lick it."

Jake was seventy-nine percent sure the Viper was trolling him, but he still complied as his curiosity won out. With much hesitation, he lifted the small bead and gave it a lick. It felt like licking a ball of glass covered in some kind of honey-like liquid and was honestly a bit gross. It was definitely not something he would ever-

+ 330 Perception.

- not do again.

He instantly wondered what the hell that was and saw that on his status, the part related to consuming elixirs had been completely filled after he did his lick. He had needed 330 more stats to cap it out, and this one lick had done just that. For clarification, the amount of stats he could get per level was up from 15 to 45 in C-grade.

Jake was excited as someone slapped the back of his head.

"Jake! Wake the fuck up. What was that?" Miranda had snapped out of her stupor and went for Jake, forgetting all her usual decorum and clearly mad.

"Eh, one of them was Oras," Jake turned out and said as he quickly stored away the small bead. "That other thing... I am not so sure. But it seemed encouraging, right?"

"Do I want to be encouraged by that... thing?" Caleb spoke unsure.

"Was that really Oras?" Miranda asked with wide eyes and a red face. "How in the everliving fuck can Arnold be Blessed by something like that? No, how is something like that even a thing?"

"What did you see?" Jake asked, wanting Miranda to calm down. It helped a bit as he got her thinking, and she slowly regained her composure.

"It... it looked like an endless field of towers with eyes at their tops," Miranda muttered. "And that other thing was a pyramid or something?"

"No?" Maria said. "There was this giant flaming eye that kept expanding as it seared into my mind together with this spinning top..."

"That isn't-"

"Everyone sees them differently," Jake clarified. "They are eldritch beings above mortal understanding, after all. Not sure how gods see them. Ah, but I honestly feel pretty fine this time around. Also, I wonder what happened to that guy?"

Jake referred to the Fallen King, who was still unconscious. Not knowing when he would wake up, Jake decided to just pick the body of the Unique Lifeform up to drag him inside once they decided to enter. However, first, everyone had to get the "what the fuck" experience out of their systems.

He had already seen Vesperia and Meira sitting in the living room, and from the looks of it, they knew they were there. Meira had headed to the kitchen and was preparing some drinks while Vesperia waited to greet them once they finally entered.

"I should have just kept my damn eyes closed," Maria complained.

"Yep," Jake agreed.

"How..." the Sword Saint finally spoke.

"I told you, they look differently based on-"

The old man responded as he drew and raised his sword. In a calm motion, he moved it through the air. A faint black line was left in its wake that quickly faded, but Jake definitely felt the familiar presence of the void for a fraction of a second. However, the Sword Saint just frowned before shaking his head.

"My apologies, such pursuits are too early," the old man smiled sadly, his demeanor calm as can be.

"What did you just do?" Jake asked.

"Void is the absence of all, the emptiest canvas of all... I considered using it with my painting profession, but it is too unstable with my current power, so I can display naught but a pointless imitation," he said with regret in his voice.

"That was void stuff. Void stuff isn't something you just do," Jake commented again.

The Sword Saint just smiled. "Perhaps I got lucky with my insights during this encounter."

Jake just looked at him for a few seconds before shaking his head. Why the hell did people call Jake some kind of genius with that bloody monster around?

Oh yeah. Bloodline.

Everyone else also just looked at the old man for a bit as he tried to wave it off by sheathing his sword again.

"Alright, enough void stuff. Let's move inside?" Jake asked.

"Let us," Miranda said while sharing wipers with the others to clean away the blood on their faces. "I need to sit down and get rid of this damn headache."

"Fair, fair," Jake nodded as he extended some mana strings and picked up the Unique Lifeform to move him inside. Sylphie protested as he woke her up and told her to just fly around by herself. Sandy looked around before rolling further onto the big lawn, far away from the others.

"I'm just gonna stay here till the big announcement... my tummy hurts," Sandy complained as the big worm returned their full size and rolled onto their back.

Seeing as Sandy wasn't the most social, Jake didn't fault her as he let the others inside. Carrying the Fallen King with mana strings was easy enough, and Vesperia moved to open the door from the inside once she noticed their approach.

"Welcome back, Sire. I have a feeling you experienced some difficulties during the trip?" the large Hive Queen said as she stood at the door wearing her golden dress.

Everyone stared at her for a moment as Maria spoke.

"I thought you said you made a wasp."

"I said I made a wasp Hive Queen," Jake answered her before talking to Vesperia. "Yeah, we encountered some void stuff."

"Jake, how the fuck is that an insect monster?" Caleb asked him telepathically.

He didn't bother to respond, as he just introduced Vesperia to the group. "Everyone, meet Vesperia, a True Hive Queen of the Vespernat Lineage."

"And you made her?" Maria asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I played a part for sure, yes," Jake agreed.

Caleb then put on a big smile and went forward. "Nice to meet you, Vesperia; my name is Caleb, but you can call me uncle."

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Vesperia looked at Caleb for less than a second before she simply smiled. "No, but thank you for the offer."

Jake gave Vesperia a massive mental thumbs-up as Caleb seemed a bit taken aback.

"Cute try, though, but while I do recognize Jake as my sire, that does not make his blood my family. I do not mean this in any offensive way; that is simply how things are," Vesperia further clarified. She looked at the others and nodded. "It is a pleasure to meet all of you."

Miranda took the momentum as she went forward. "The pleasure is all mine, your majesty. I am Miranda Wells, the City Leader of Lord Thayne's city back on Earth and one of his confidants."

"No need for the formalities, Ms. Wells, just call me Vesperia," the Hive Queen smiled at Miranda. The two women looked at each other for a moment before the others also moved to meet her.

Felix just bowed but didn't seem overly interested, Sylphie looked at Vesperia a bit weirdly, and Maria was more polite than usual. Sandy didn't come to greet her as they were too busy dealing with the consequences of trying to eat the essence of nothingness itself. The King also didn't for obvious reason, with the last to greet Vesperia being the Sword Saint, who bowed respectfully as he observed her.

"I have little understanding of True Royals and only operate on rumors and second-hand information, so please let me know if my question is impolite, but would you be open to a quick spar before we head off?" the old man asked politely.

Vesperia raised an eyebrow. "While many would not see such a request as acceptable, I see no issue with it, but are you certain? My current form is not the one you would be facing."

"I am well aware," the Sword Saint nodded.

"Let us have a small bout later on, then. First, let us go inside," Vesperia said as she motioned for them to enter.

Caleb walked by Jake and muttered to him. "And here I thought I could set up fun play dates between our two kids."

"Calling her my kid is kinda weird, man," Jake said. "Look at her."

"Yeah, they grow up so fast, don't they?" Caleb teased him. "Just so we are clear, I will tell mom and dad about the large amazoness-looking Hive Queen woman who calls you her sire."

"I would expect nothing less of you."

The group entered the mansion's living room, where Meira had already prepared tea and snacks to welcome the guests. Caleb, who was still walking with Jake, looked a bit surprised when he saw Meira and raised an eyebrow as he threw Jake a glance.

"Ah, this here is Meira, a fellow member of the Order of the Malefic Order who works here at my residence," Jake quickly clarified to the group. He felt damn lucky they had time to make her join the Order before this meeting, as that dispelled much of the awkwardness that could have ensued.

"Ah, a pleasure to meet you," Miranda greeted Meira. "I also believe a congratulations is in order for successfully joining the Order."

Jake had told Miranda about Meira a few times in the past, as it was honestly hard to never mention her when they had their occasional meeting about how he was doing in the Order. He also had a feeling she could learn about her from the Verdant Witches even if he didn't.

"Thank you," Meira bowed. "Please enjoy the refreshments. I shall take my leave and allow you all to discuss in peace."

"No, please stay for a while," Caleb said with a smile as he went over and extended his hand. "I would love to hear more about it has been working for my brother."

"Brother?" Meira asked, surprised, as she shook his hand on instinct.

It was now Jake realized he had never really talked about his family when around Meira. Mind you, this was not because Jake had forgotten, but a purposeful choice as he didn't want to bring up any potential trauma Meira may have, considering she had been enslaved by the Order. Talking about family just seemed a bit insensitive.

"Little brother, to be more exact," Caleb clarified. "However, I am not at the Order as his brother but as a Judge of the Court of Shadows at the behest of my Patron, Umbra."

Meira slowly nodded but was clearly still more interested in the fact Jake had a brother.

"It is my honor to greet the Judge and brother of Lord Thayne," Meira bowed deeply.

"Lord Thayne, is it?" Caleb said with a raised eyebrow. "Tell me, how did you two end up meeting? How did you get to work here at Jake's place?"

Jake knew what the little shit was fishing for. He bloody knew. Shit, why wouldn't he? The Order and using slaves? It was hard to name a more iconic duo, so most would probably assume she was his slave by default. Moreover, she was allowed to be there when Jake brought so many people, and she clearly knew he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Some random employee Jake had hired wouldn't be aware of such things before the big announcement. At least that is what Jake theorized Caleb had concluded... likely giving Jake a bit too much credit when it came to keeping secrets.

"It was that asshole snake god who thought it would be funny," Jake explained. "The moment I arrived here, Meira was already waiting and was assigned as my slave against my will. Not anymore, though.

She joined the Order and is now just another member, but I allowed her to stay here and work because she wanted to."

"Oh?" Caleb said with a smile. "Now, isn't that quite something. I just have one tiny little question. If she is no longer a slave, why is there still a slave contract in place?"

"There isn't one," Jake frowned.

"I quite literally have a skill allowing me to detect if she has one, so are you saying she signed a new one after yours was nullified?" Caleb asked skeptically.

"No? I don't think so?" Jake frowned more deeply as he looked at Meira. He saw how she blushed and looked embarrassed at their discussion.

"Ah, sorry, rude to discuss it in front of you like this..." Jake muttered. "Were you forced to sign a new contract or something? I get some non-disclosure agreement stuff, but..."

"Jake," Miranda cut in. "Just for quick clarification, when did you nullify the contract?"

"It was nullified when she joined the Order," Jake answered. She clearly had her gold token and was a member; Izil had confirmed this too.

"I asked when you nullified it," Miranda said as she sighed.

"I..." Jake said as his mouth was open for a bit. He then looked at Meira. "I thought it was gone after you joined? I am sure I read that people can't have their slaves become full members, and the Order made the contract, so they should have nullified it too."

That was how it worked, right?

"That isn't how it works, no," Miranda sighed, answering his thoughts. "At least not for you. You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, for bloody sake. These kinds of rules don't apply. Did you seriously expect some random clerk at the Order to be capable of nullifying the contract?"

"... yes?" Jake said meekly.

He quickly took out his token and promptly searched through it. He remembered it being linked to the contract and... well, fuck.

Yep, still there. Jake immediately nullified the contract, ignoring everything else, thus officially freeing Meira for good. It was surprisingly easy, and he didn't even feel anything change. Meira did briefly shiver, but otherwise, nothing happened.

"Fixed!" Jake said, but he was already getting several judgemental stares.

"I'm gonna tell mom you had an elf slave," Caleb said.

"Please don't," Jake pleaded.

Caleb just grinned widely, and Jake was pretty damn sure the bastard wouldn't listen to anything he said.

"Why... why would you not want to eternally serve the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?" the damn sculptor asked Meira, his face filled with genuine confusion. "To forsake such an honor, I-"

"It was my decision," Jake cut him off.

"I see. Alright then," Felix nodded. He then seemed to have a thought. "Can I be your slave the-"

"No."

"Oh..." Felix said, looking like a kicked puppy as he stared at the ground.

"Ignoring Jake's questionable employment practices, do we have anything else we need to discuss regarding the upcoming ceremony? You have been briefed, Vesperia?" Miranda asked.

"No, I would like a quick rundown on what will happen," the Hive Queen answered.

"How about you, Meira? Will you attend?" Miranda also asked the embarrassed Meira.

Jake could see how uncomfortable she was, surrounded by everyone. She looked out of place, and Miranda seemed to also have noticed.

"No," Meira said. Jake had invited her, but she had rejected it without a second thought. Jake totally got her; he also didn't want to go if he didn't have to.

"Alright," Miranda smiled as she looked at Jake. "Let's allow Meira to attend to her own matters then, shouldn't we?"

Jake nodded and smiled at Meira. "Yeah, I am sure you are busy with your own stuff. Thanks for the tea and all."

Meira was obviously relieved as she bowed. "I hope the ceremony proceeds as expected; it was nice meeting all of you."

With those words, she scurried off towards her own building away from the main mansion. After she was gone, Maria gave him an inquisitive look.

"Did you... you know."

Jake wondered what she meant but quickly realized. He frowned and looked at her sternly. "No."

Caleb also shook his head and threw Maria a glare. "You can say a lot of things about my older brother, but yeah, not that."

"I meant no offense; I was just curious, you know..." Maria said, knowing she had fucked up.

Vesperia giggled a bit at their exchange and shook her head. "I truly have much to learn about you humans and your customs."

Jake, wanting to change the subject and looked at Miranda. "So, any idea who will attend this event? Which factions? Besides the obvious ones."

"Many significant factions you have never heard about will be there, but it isn't like everyone will be announced. I would reckon thousands of god-level factions will attend, but it is no more than a handful you need to actually care about or even interact with. As I mentioned before, they are just there to butter up some of the officials from the Order of the Malefic Viper and get in their good graces for future business ventures," Miranda explained.

"Right," Jake said. He didn't actually care much. He really just wanted to change the subject. Luckily, the conversation was revived as a certain Unique Lifeform Jake had thrown on a couch also revived.

"We... have arrived in the first universe?" the muddled voice of the Fallen King spoke.

"That we have," Jake confirmed. "Meeting those Void Gods hit you hard, huh?"

"My senses are not like that of you humans or beasts. I saw things that were impossible yet familiar, superimposed concepts that resonated with my very core yet in conflict and paradoxically opposed. My soul magic is anchored in the realm of the eldritch, so to see a true being personifying that concept... it was too much," the King explained in a surprisingly open fashion. "My limited comprehension only made me see more of that which is unseeable and forced my mind to try and understand more of the incomprehensible."

"Sounds rough, but we made it back here safely. Was afraid we would need to find two new party members during this ceremony," Jake cracked a joke.

"You are fortunate you did not have to downgrade," the Fallen King said as he floated his body to an upright position. It was also only now he regarded the only new person in the room.

"You must be the True Royal Hive Queen," the Unique Lifeform greeted her. "I am known as the Fallen King."

"It is a pleasure to meet a Unique Lifeform," Vesperia said with respect. "Your kind is rare, and we have had so few ectognamorph-esque Unique Lifeforms throughout history."

"To try and categorize one such as I with other races is meaningless. We are unique by definition and belong to no tribe," the King dismissed her.

"Some of your kind still seek ties to others, often finding those reminding them most of themselves. Perhaps it is not perfect, but it is the closest thing they can ever get," Vesperia countered. "Besides, have you not also embraced unity?"

"An impossible choice made only because I fell at the hands of your creator," the King spat back. "I do not recognize him for his Lineage or race, but solely his accomplishments."

Jake raised an eyebrow. Well, that is nice, isn't it?

"So have I. Which makes him part of my Hive. My tribe and my people. He is an ectognamorph and honored member of the Endless Empire in all but race from my point of view," Vesperia refused to back down.

Leaning back and relaxing, Jake would lie if he said he didn't enjoy their debate as, for once, people weren't shit-talking him during it. They continued for a good while as the King once more countered how race then played no role in who was an ectognamorph, with Vesperia arguing that some were simply included by default while others could become honored members.

It was nice not having to get involved, and no one else bothered getting into it with them, either.

Eventually, they finally calmed down without either side backing down, and no compromise or agreement being reached. It was ultimately the Sword Saint breaking them up by asking if Vesperia would be open to an exchange of pointers now, something she agreed to as the two of them went outside.

Jake looked out the window and saw Vesperia transform as the old man praised her before they began their spar. Well, Jake wasn't really sure if he would call it a spar. From the looks of it, neither side used any skills or did anything fancy. Their speeds were even low as they exchanged blows, it looking more like a dance than a fight, with every single exchange ending with a small scratch on Vesperia's armor. The longer it went on, it began to look like a disciple and his student.

The rest of them stayed inside and just relaxed as they chatted. Sylphie eventually woke up and went off to explore the mansion, and through Jake's sphere, he saw her reach Meira's room. There, she scared the shit out of the poor elf by turning into wind and appearing on her desk right in front of her face. She looked damn proud, too, when Meira fell over backward.

After a bit, Vesperia and the Sword Saint came back in, with Vesperia praising the Sword Saint and didn't seem down. She then went off with Miranda for some briefing on the upcoming ceremony, leaving the Sword Saint back with Jake and the others.

Sandy also eventually came to and made Jake rush outside as the huge space worm began eating his fucking lawn while complaining about feeling empty from trying to eat literal void. He was forced to feed the glutton with other valuable items to tide over the wait, lest Sandy decided to try and eat one of the buildings.

Finally, after many hours of a mix between relaxation and chaos, the time arrived as a figure teleported onto the now mostly ruined lawn. Her aura instantly washed over the mansion, getting everyone's attention as she greeted Jake.

"The time has come," Viridia said.

Jake nodded, and soon everyone joined him as they headed off to the big ceremony where surely nothing could go wrong, and everything would go just as expected.

