

## Hunter 641

### Chapter 641 - Chosen Of The Malefic Viper

Multiversal events were few and far between. Very rarely did something happen that factions with any knowledge of the wider happening cared about, but this was one of them. The last one had been the initiation of the new universe, and while this one was certainly not even remotely on the same scale, it was still a matter of extreme importance.

Why it mattered was naturally due to who hosted it.

The Automata Legion, Endless Empire, Holy Church, Risen, Valhal, Dragonflight Accords, United Tribe, and Altmar Empire... these factions were generally considered the most known and most powerful of the entire multiverse. Others did exist with close to their power, but they ultimately still fell short for several reasons.

Umbra's Court of Shadows was certainly powerful, but not many would consider them a true peak-level faction. Their numbers were still somewhat limited, they did not establish huge territories they controlled, and while Umbra was a peak-level figure, she rarely appeared herself or got involved.

The same could be said for many other large factions. There did exist forces filled with elementals, the Starborn, beast alliances, and the Golden Road Emporium... all were incredibly powerful but still limited. Top-level, yes, but not true peak factions.

None would say the current Order of the Malefic Viper was one either. But that didn't mean it had always been like that.

The best comparison to the Order of the Malefic Viper would be Valhal.

Valhal did have many members, yes, but they did not control huge areas, still making them limited. People were rarely born into the faction but joined as it aligned with their interests. This meant their resources were not at peak level, and their numbers were not even close. Overall, their territory was small, and their influence was limited. Even then, none would dare not put them on the same level as even the largest of factions. Because they had one thing that made them considered a peak-level faction:

Valdemar.

When a single man could stand before an entire empire, a single decree of war could make previously considered top-level factions crumble to dust in but a few years... who would dare argue? His fighting power and threat level as an individual was equivalent to a peak-level faction alone.

And that was why the Order was best compared to Valhal.

Many still remembered. Back in the seventh era, before the Viper had disappeared, when people discussed the most powerful individual, many names were brought up, and the Malefic Viper was always among them.

Then it happened. The Malefic Viper went on a warpath and showed no mercy as he slaughtered his way through a universe.

Eight Primordials had needed to get involved in stopping the rampaging Malefic Viper. Valdemar, Inmortau the Blightfather, the Holy Mother, the Starseizing Titan, Stormild, Eversmile, Yggdrasil, and Aeon Clok had all appeared. Eight Primordials had gone to calm one, a fight ensuing as a result.

None truly knew what had happened... all they knew was that none of the Primordials that had been involved made any public appearances or left their divine realms for over ten thousand years after the fight, with the Malefic Viper entering seclusion. Leaving in his wake the tenth of an entire universe destroyed and desolate still to this day, and presumably, eight Primordials injured so badly they didn't dare leave the safety of their realms.

But... that was then.

Eighty-five full eras had passed. Every other faction had expanded, and every other Primordial had publicly grown in power, keeping their spots at the peak of the multiverse. They had all struggled, participated in events for the gods, trained their people, gathered Records, and slowly improved themselves. They had progressed and grown with the world, their power now incomparable to what it had been back then.

Meanwhile, none had heard anything about the Viper. His Order had merely persisted, still a respected faction due to the Lord Protector and its heritage, but it was no longer truly considered a high-level faction by the general public. Only in name would they call it that, out of respect for its Primordial founder and due to so many other peak-level factions considering it so.

So the big question everyone had before this big ceremony was as thus:

What kind of god would appear on stage? What kind of Primordial had reappeared? What Chosen would he have picked among the new initiates? Was he even sane?

Perhaps most importantly, they would come to discover... had the multiverse just gained another peak-level faction comparable to Valhal simply by virtue of their leader?

Or was the Malefic One truly just a shadow of the past, surviving on his name and heritage alone?

Jake appeared in a waiting room with everyone else, Sandy having been forced to shrink down to not get hurt. No way they would be able to break the structures within the Order of the Malefic Viper, as Jake guessed not even A-grades could punch through a wall there.

"Welcome to the Order of the Malefic Viper," Viridia said when they arrived. "Lord Thayne, you will be the main character together with the Malefic One during this event, and I hope you are ready."

She then turned to Sandy and bowed deeply. "I welcome the Chosen of the Lord Protector. It is my honor to be in your presence. Let me know if there is anything I can do for you, and I will--"

"Snacks," Sandy said.

"Pardon?" Viridia asked, confused.

"Can you get snacks?" Sandy asked in a hopeful tone.

"Oh, most certainly," Viridia quickly agreed to the space worm's demands, and less than five seconds later, figures began teleporting in with piles of food and natural treasures."

Sandy stared at the mounds of stuff for a few seconds. "Viridia, right?"

"Yes, Lord Sandy."

"You're a good person, you know that, right?" Sandy said before squiggling over and vacuuming up the piles.

"It pleases me that the Chosen is satisfied with the offerings," Viridia seemed relieved.

Jake looked at Sandy eating happily and reckoned they were probably the best kind of Chosen one could have. No annoying demands, and you could make them happy by just providing them with enough food, unlike Jake, who kept making trouble for anyone and everyone.

"When is the ceremony officially beginning?" Miranda asked.

"All the guests have arrived, and we should commence in five minutes where I will take the stage. You will then be brought there when the time is right, and your only jobs will be to just flare your presences. Don't hide anything, but just be yourselves," Viridia explained. "Only Lord Thayne and Lord Sandy will appear during this initial part of the opening ceremony."

She then turned to Caleb, Maria, Felix, and Miranda. "I will shortly teleport the four of you to the front of the hall in which the announcement will take place. All of you will naturally be in positions as guests of honor, but as you are not party members of Lord Thayne, you will not be on stage."

Miranda nodded. "That is as expected."

None of the others argued either, with even Felix on his best behavior. He seemed to have a lot of respect for Viridia and even called her a "fellow servant," to which she took no offense.

"Your majesty, you will appear when the Malefic One summons you, but I assume you have already been informed of this?" Viridia spoke to Vesperia.

"Yes, I was briefed before by your fellow Verdant Witch," Vesperia nodded in confirmation.

"Great," the Hall Master smiled. "Let us proceed then. I shall teleport you four first."

With a wave of her hand, she sent off the four who would not appear on stage and looked to the only people she had not spoken to directly yet. "You three will be the party members of Lord Thayne at Nevermore, correct?"

Jake saw Viridia study them closely as if sizing them up. She barely looked at the King and seemed fine with Sylphie, but her gaze lingered for a while on the old man with a sword at his side. There were no comments, but she was definitely critical.

"That is correct," the Sword Saint answered, seemingly aware of her gaze and judgment.

"Alright. You will all be brought out after the ordeal with the True Royal, where you will be announced as his party members. Miranda should have told you that you don't have to do much there. Just make sure your Blessings are on full display."

Sylphie made a cute screech as the Sword Saint nodded. The King didn't say anything either, but then again, it wasn't like he had a Blessing to display.

"I just want to forewarn you all, during the after-party, you may find yourself heavily scrutinized by those present. Many will doubt if you are fit company for the Chosen and his journey through Nevermore. This will mostly be done due to their wishes of inserting themselves or a member of their own faction into this party, so do not take it to heart. Just be aware you may end up challenged many times, and even if no fights happen, it may prove uncomfortable," Virida explained.

"Interesting," the Fallen King said in an amused tone. "You truly believe they would challenge us?"

"Few would be foolish enough to challenge a Unique Lifeform or question its power, but the other two may face issues," Virida answered him.

"Ree!" Sylphie said, welcoming anyone to dare challenge her might.

The Sword Saint only gave a light smile, not saying anything either.

Viridia nodded at their determination. "In either case, I wish you luck. I shall take my leave now."

She teleported away as Jake exchanged glances with the others. A screen appeared floating in the air a second later, displaying an utterly massive hall. The seating looked more like a stretching mountain range than a place for people to stand or sit. Hundreds of sections were made, and Jake couldn't even begin to comprehend the number of people he saw already there waiting.

"Earth's entire population could be on a single one of those stands," the Sword Saint muttered. "There must be trillions."

Jake threw the guy a glare. The old man didn't give off the slightest hint of nervousness.

Thanks for pointing that out, sure gonna help my stage fright... Jake cursed internally as he saw Viridia appear in the middle of the stage, the attention of trillions turning to her.

Helenstromoz greeted Albaromoz as she joined the A-grade on one of the stands reserved for the Draconian Accords. She saw people from every single Dragonflight present. The Emberflight, Azureflight, Regalflight, Stormflight, Darkflight, Lumenflight, Terraflight, Silverflight and the Wildflight. All of them had S-grades among their representatives, showing the amount of support the Accords had decided to display towards the Order. Even the stuck-up Regalflight, the golden dragons, had made an appearance despite their endless arrogance, which often was too much even for other dragons.

"Do you believe the rumors are true?" Helen asked Albaromoz. "That the Malefic Dragonkin, Draskil, is truly the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?"

"It is possible, yes, but I find it doubtful," he shook his head. "The dragonkin was powerful, but I have seen other Chosen of less impressive gods. He does not quite compare in other domains than pure fighting prowess."

"So you think it is someone that has perhaps not publicly appeared in the Order before now?"

"With the influence of the Malefic One, he could have easily hidden anyone if he so desired, so that is entirely possible," Albaromoz said, shaking his head. "It truly is difficult to say, but I believe he is in the Order. Didn't you hear about the young master from the Azureflight?"

"Wait, did he truly...?"

"Yes, he was punished by the Malefic One, and I see no other explanation than it being related to the Chosen," he explained. "The fact that the Malefic One acted also makes me believe his Chosen is indeed still early C-grade. If not, the Chosen would have handled the dragonkin himself."

"Hm," Helen nodded. "Perhaps you are right, and it simply isn't someone public-facing yet. Something like creating a True Royal cannot be an easy matter and must have taken a long time and even more focus and talent. Isn't it entirely possible he is a dedicated alchemist?"

"That I find unlikely, the Malefic One has always been known as someone emphasizing fighting power," Albaromoz disagreed.

Helenstromoz was unsure what to say as they simply waited for the ceremony to begin. The hall was filled, and she felt practically every faction that tended to be on friendly terms with the Order present, including a few new ones. Seeing the representatives from the Automata Legion and Endless Empire was

especially surprising. Not that they had shown up, but with how many they had come with. They were likely the two biggest groups.

"Valhal truly didn't arrive," Helen muttered after a while. She did not see them in the territory for peak-level factions.

"I guess the rumors are true, then," Albaromoz shook his head. "The Order and Valhal were never on good terms, and many say Valdemar still carries a grudge against the Viper after their last encounter, even to this day. Seeing as they didn't even show up with even the smallest delegation, things can't be good. Even the Holy Church has at least a few diplomats."

"Will an actual conflict break out?"

"I don't know, but if it does, the Draconian Accords will stay far away. All I can say is that things don't look good," the A-grade dragon sighed. "Ah, it is beginning now!"

Helen turned her head and saw that the Hall Master of the Order had indeed appeared on the stage below. A massive screen appeared above the stage, displaying it so even those with lower Perception could see everything.

"I, Viridia of the Verdant Lagoon, Hall Master of the Order of the Malefic Viper, bid you all welcome," her voice echoed throughout the massive hall as she spoke. "I welcome you, and I welcome a new future for the Order of the Malefic Viper."

"The Order has long been stagnant, long nothing but a shriveled reminder of its previous glory. No more. Our Patron, the Malefic One, has returned and already begun making himself known to the multiverse

once more. Know this is only the beginning. Today, I stand here as the sole Hall Master of the Order, but soon more Halls as come as we expand beyond the first universe. I hope that the day we do so, you will all welcome us as we welcome you today. With that said, I know none are here to listen to my ramblings. You are here to finally see the two new Chosen of the Order... and listen to the words of the Malefic One himself. So, without further ado..."

A giant black swirling gate opened up in the middle of the stage, pulsating with power.

"It is with honor and privilege I present to you, the Chosen of the Lord Protector, Lord Sandy, the Cosmic Genesis Worm!"

Out of the gate floated a giant mass that Helen didn't recognize right away. It was some kind of monster, that was for sure. This Chosen did not look particularly threatening or scary, but she still felt something odd as she looked at it.

A magic circle on the stage activated, and the aura of the creature was amplified and spread throughout the hall for all to feel it as if they were standing on stage themselves. The unquestionable presence of a Chosen washed over all of them, mixing with the actual presence of the worm it belonged to.

Strong, Helen concluded. She instinctively knew that despite appearance, this was a peak-level creature.

"The fabric itself bends to the will of the Chosen... it is almost as if space itself is of different property in their vicinity," Albaromoz muttered, partly for her to learn. "I have never heard of such a variant either."

"A fitting Chosen for the Hydra," Helen nodded.

"Yes, I do believe so," the dragon agreed. "Their Paths appear to aligned too, both focusing on concepts related to consumption."

Chatter was heard all around, but the general consensus was one of approval. The giant cosmic worm was a fitting choice for the Boundless Hydra. A powerful beast filled with talent and of an unknown variant that was clearly incredibly powerful. The only weird thing was that the Lord Protector had blessed a C-grade, but considering it was his first in so long, most didn't question it. People did wonder if this was a variant of the new universe, as it was so unknown, not knowing they would soon get their answer.

The Chosen of the Lord Protector moved to the side of the arena as Viridia spoke once more.

"Many of you are likely left with questions regarding the variant race of Lord Sandy. Perhaps some are even asking themselves if perhaps the Chosen of the Malefic One, the figure behind the re-emergence of the Vespernat True Royal Lineage, played a hand... I can confirm that suspicion."

More chatter filled the halls as Helen's eyes opened wide. "How is that possible?"

"I do not know... but if that is the truth, then I think we may have underestimated this ability," the dragon answered. The Emberflight did have a meeting regarding this entire True Royal ordeal but had concluded the ability had to be unbelievably limited. So limited none from the Draconian Accords had a chance to make use of it. However, If he had already done it twice now...

"Do know that this doesn't mean it is something the Chosen can do on command. The system still demands balance, and there is a price for every action. Before you dare to approach the Order or the

Chosen, be confident you are willing to pay this price and respect when he is not," Viridia said sternly, clearly warning all those present who were forming machinations in their minds.

The Hall Master let the words linger a bit before she spoke once more. "I believe there is no reason to further delay. I invite the Chosen to enter the stage!"

Energy cracked as the gateway spun to life once more. Soon, a figure began emerging, and Helen was practically at the edge of her seat to see who the Chosen was.

The first thing they saw were two glowing eyes in the swirling darkness of the gateway. Helen concluded it had to be some kind of monster, perhaps a dragonkin, but then a leg exited. Boots on humanoid feet. The form was slowly revealed as Helenstromoz thought this humanoid looked familiar.

"It can't be," the A-grade beside her shook. "It's him?"

Wait... impossible! How?

She also realized who he was as the Chosen stepped towards the magic circle.

"Behold, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper! Jake Thayne!"

Silence roamed as frowns formed after many correctly saw he was a human. None had expected this... perhaps it would have been a snake, likely a dragonkin, or in rare cases, some other beast. But not a human. Doubt had begun to sprout, questions were forming, and disbelief was rampant.

And then he stepped on the circle, a wave of his presence blasting through the halls, instantly washing away all doubt and shaking Helen to her very core as she and everyone else realized what stood before them.

An apex predator.

No...

The monster who hunts them.

Chapter 642 - Any Questions?

Back when Jake was in elementary school, the school thought it would be a great idea to make his entire class perform a play for their parents. Why this was a thing anyone ever thought forcing kids to do was acceptable, Jake didn't know. He had tried all he could to just be a tree or some shit during the play, but no, he had been forced to have an actual role. He even had to speak four entire lines.

He had only fucked up two of them and hated every moment.

That entire play had imprinted itself in Jake's mind to the point where he still had nightmares about standing on stage and not remembering his lines decades later. To call it trauma would probably be a bit too much, but Jake sure as hell didn't like standing on a stage in front of a bunch of people. Standing in front of fifty or so parents and teachers had already been far too much, so Jake asked himself...

Why in the everliving fuck had he agreed to this?

Jake stood on the magic circle, trying to focus on nothing else but blaring out his presence and amplifying his Bloodline as much as he could. The formation projected it across the entire hall, and he saw people be slightly affected all around. Even Viridia looked like the presence hit her, and as she was closest, it hit her the hardest.

Her eyes opened wide for a moment before she gave him an approving smile. Jake tried to focus on only her and Sandy and to ignore the crowd of trillions all scrutinizing him. The fact he felt billions of Identifies being used on him didn't help either. Every single one of them was blocked... until he felt one that wasn't.

His eyes focused on a certain person within the crowd. He momentarily saw a woman with a smile before she raised an eyebrow and disappeared.

Familiar...Eversmile?

A few more Identifies hit him that weren't fully blocked. His eyes darted around as he located several gods in the crowd. He also spotted Caleb and the others pretty close to the stage, all of them sitting there and flaring their own presences.

Jake soon relaxed the Bloodline-empowered portion of his presence. He did this for two reasons. Firstly it was to potentially hint his Bloodline only allowed him to empower if momentarily. The truth was that Jake hadn't really done anything... in fact, he had just stopped suppressing it.

The second reason he relaxed was the many people he saw sweating and shivering. Most were protected by seniors who were able to shield them with their own presence, but not everyone could handle it. Even those seniors were also affected on their own. Despite Jake's presence being a lot weaker than theirs in pure power, the qualitative difference still exerted an instinctive response.

Viridia once more threw him an approving look, and after he had barely been standing on the platform for five seconds, she spoke again.

"Human. Chosen, Bloodline Patriarch. I see the confusion, and I shared the sentiment for a while. However, you should all have felt it. Even if doubt still remains, I believe no words I speak will convince you. So, rather than try to explain the thought process of the Malefic One--"

"I shall do so myself."

A blanket of pressure fell over the entire hall. The air itself seemed to almost vibrate as it hit Jake along with everyone else present. Jake's presence was powerful, yes, there was no denying that... but he was ultimately just a C-grade. Even if he had quality on his side, it was the difference between a potent drop of water and a world-consuming flood.

Overwhelming power was the only description Jake thought fitting. Like it was a practiced act, everyone in the hall fell to their knees. Even Caleb and the others kneeled, though Jake clearly saw they could have resisted far more easily if they so wanted. However, chances are that even if they did want to resist, they would eventually be forced down. Viridia was also on her knees, and the only people not kneeling were a few hidden gods observing from afar. As if Sandy kneeled... Jake had no way to tell.

In the next moment, Villy appeared beside him as space itself shattered in his wake. He softly landed on the stage, the magic circle beneath their feet instantly exploding into motes of energy as it futilely tried to amplify the presence of a Primordial.

Bloody showoff, Jake commented internally as Villy stood beside him and grinned.

Albaromoz was shaken as he saw the Chosen stand there, his presence drilling into his very soul. Despite the man being so much weaker than himself, he still felt pressured by it. Coupled with the aura of a Chosen, it was truly suppressing.

Hundreds of thoughts went through his head. A smidgen of disbelief had still been present until he felt the recognizable aura he had experienced during the lesson he had given on Soulflames not even that long ago. Every interaction he had ever had with the Chosen flashed in his mind, and cold sweat ran down his back. The Emberflight had been disrespectful on several occasions. If they went with the assumption of Lord Thayne having the backing of an S-grade, their conduct had been acceptable, but towards a Chosen?

The only good thing was that they had done nothing overly public toward the Chosen. They had made no declarations or tried to put pressure on his backer but stuck to subtle research into who it could be. This research had turned up with nothing of value, which in retrospect made a lot of sense considering who exactly it was they were trying to uncover the identity of.

I will have to inform the higher-ups... if they don't already know, the dragon resigned himself. What exactly the consequences would be, he couldn't tell, but he hoped to somehow still leverage the fact he and Helen had some level of rapport with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Plus, the Malefic Dragonkin had been meeting with Helen a few times since his visit, and if the friendship between Draskil and the Chosen was genuine, perhaps they could exploit something there.

As he was deep in thought, only using part of his focus to prevent Helen from being too shaken by the aura of the Chosen, the Hall Master spoke. Albaromoz listened to her words, and his eyes opened wide as she reached the end.

Then, the pressure hit.

"I shall do so myself."

Albaromoz was on his knees before he even comprehended the appearance of the Primordial. Before a god, he felt like an insignificant insect. He could do nothing but sweat as a feeling of innate reverence also pervaded his body. The natural reverence towards a god all mortals felt. The instinct to kneel and recognize a superior being with both your heart and soul. No mortal could – or would dare – stand in the presence of such a being.

He barely managed to lift his gaze as the visage of the Malefic One entered his eyes. Yet Albaromoz's eyes wandered as they opened wide.

eaglesnove1,coM The aura of the Chosen had been powerful, yes. Shocking, even. But as an A-grade, and knowing it originated from a Bloodline and his identity as a Chosen, he could rationalize it. Yet no matter how impressed he had been before...

The impact Albaromoz felt upon seeing a mere C-grade mortal stand tall and stoic in the presence of a Primordial was an image he believed forever seared into his mind.

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Vilastromoz looked out over the hall as he appeared dramatically. He saw several old acquaintances present, hidden so as to not disturb the mortals. Seeing their reaction to Jake had been more than amusing, and as the Viper, would it not only be proper to try and surpass his dear Chosen?

He had released his presence as the mortals knelt. The natural response of the humanoid body of mortals when in the presence of a god. Well, alright, his assessment that all mortals had knelt was slightly wrong, for there was one right there on the stage who still stood unaffected.

Walking up to stand next to his Chosen, Vilastromoz smiled and continued.

“This is my second speech like this in but a few years. Do note, I am not planning on making it a habit,” the Viper spoke jokingly, referring to the time he appeared in the Order and killed that demigod. “I guess one could argue there is a difference, as guests were allowed during this one, but I digress. Rather than needlessly ramble, let me just get to the point. As my dear little Hall Master said, I am back. Not just for a trip either. I am back for good. The multiverse has only had eleven Primordials for the last eighty-five eras, and as of a few years ago, that was rightly corrected.”

Placing his hand on Jake’s shoulder, his grin widened.

“My Chosen here partly to blame for that being the case. But let me make it clear... I just needed that little push. He had good timing, and it gave me an excuse. Not being known as someone who only takes half-measures, I believe it only proper I reclaim what has been lost over the eras while also expanding to take back our rightful place in the multiverse: the peak.”

A challenge to all the factions present. And a promise.

“Now, with that clarified, I want to address my choice of Jake here as my Chosen,” Vilastromoz said.  
“Rather than doing so with an explanation, I shall do so with a simple question.”

His smile faded as he looked out over the masses, with his true attention directed at the many hidden gods.

“Who the fuck are you to question my judgment?”

Villy why do you have to be so damn intense... it’s embarrassing, Jake muttered internally at the Viper, loudly telling everyone to fuck off and not question him. Couldn’t he have just told them it was due to his Bloodline or something...

Then again, it would probably work. What did Jake know? The Viper had been a god since gods were a thing, so if anyone knew how to tell off people, it had to be him.

“With that matter out of the way, let’s get to something else I am sure many of you have been looking forward to. The announcement already mentioned it, but we have one more individual to present today. I am naturally speaking of the True Royal from the Vespernat Lineage!” the Viper said loudly, and Jake felt some excitement return to the room after Villy’s angry scolding before.

He especially saw two sections of the hall perk up. Both towards the back and on opposite sides. One of them was filled with humanoids, but a lot of them looked to have metallic parts. Others just looked like straight-up metal golems, like the Altmar Census one. The Automata, Jake reckoned.

The second section was filled with ectognas. These, too, all had humanoid forms, but often some insect parts still remained, such as feelers or wings. Same as with Vesperia. This was naturally the delegation from the Endless Empire.

Both these sections were filled, and it looked more like massive armies than some diplomatic mission. Jake was also certain that several gods were hidden among them.

“Before I bring her out, I want to clarify one thing. I have no relations or authority over this True Royal. I make no decisions for her. Jake is the sole source of her creations, with my input nothing more than that of a passive observer that helped with general advice. That also means I will make no choices for him. Only support those he makes,” Villy explained, being super nice in Jake’s opinion. Besides the fact that he just dumped a shitload of pressure on Jake to handle all the inquisitive individuals who would hound him to the end of time, that is.

“With that said, I want everyone to give Vesperia a warm welcome.”

With those words, another black vortex gateway opened up. Vesperia had been ready and waiting on the other side and quietly floated out. Her face was stoic, like the crowd didn’t faze her in the slightest, and Jake believed that it truly didn’t. Compared to him, she was born to handle this kind of pressure.

A new magic circle appeared beneath Vesperia’s feet as she landed, blasting her presence into the hall. Compared to Jake and Villy’s, this one didn’t evoke as big of a response, though it was hard to gauge, considering everyone was still kneeling.

Now, this muted response was only the case if one went by the entire hall... because one section did have quite the response. The Endless Empire was clearly excited at the appearance of the True Royal,

and Jake had a feeling the gods hidden among them would have teleported over right away if not for fear of the Viper standing on the stage.

The same was probably true of the Automata Legion. Jake faintly felt some killing intent leaking all the way from their section, and many of them were no doubt keen on seeing Vesperia dead.

“It has been a long time since we saw the reemergence of a True Royal Lineage, hasn’t it?” the Viper said in a jovial tone, clearly enjoying the moment.

“My Chosen, Jake, didn’t bring forth her existence by accident. While he did not necessarily aim to make a True Royal, he did aim to create the impossible. Sandy, the Chosen of the Order’s Lord Protector, was also a product of my Chosen’s interference in the evolutionary process. Know that this is something only he can do. Tied to his Records. As such, it is not a feat he can repeat whenever he wants to,” Villy said, kindly telling everyone to not pressure Jake too much into doing annoying things.

The words were also kept obscure on purpose. While this made clear it was Jake’s unique ability, it did not say why or how he could do it. While his Bloodline was certainly one explanation, many would have trouble connecting the dots between a Bloodline having solely to do with presences and creating powerful variants like this. A better explanation would be some Soulbound system-granted item through some special event or something like that. Keeping them questioning was all they hoped to do, all while not outright lying. The truth would come out sooner or later anyway.

“With that said... I believe we are done here,” the Viper said, surprising Jake.

This was it? Viridia speaking a few sentences, some people teleporting in, and then Villy doing a short speech?

“Unless there are any questions, that is?” Villy asked.

Jake was pretty damn sure no one would da-

“I have one, oh Malefic One,” a voice suddenly cut through the hall.

A figure appeared in the sky, walking in the air. “Firstly, let me excuse my lateness; I had a signing session I just couldn’t miss. I didn’t get an invitation, though. It must have gotten lost somewhere, huh?”

The smile of the Viper faded as his face turned serious. With full force, his presence reappeared, focused solely on the human-looking man floating above the hall. Below, he saw countless people stare in either terror or surprise at the one who dared talk to the Viper like that.

When the presence struck the man, he simply smiled. The next second, this new god’s aura flared outwards, making Jake’s eyes open in surprise.

“Yip of Yore...” the Viper spoke in a severe tone as Jake felt the two auras at once, and he could only stare as his mind processed what he felt.

He had heard this Yip of Yore was powerful, but...

Not to have an aura equal to Villy's.

#### Chapter 643 - A Grand Declaration

The two overwhelming auras clashed in mid-air, reality itself vibrating from the metaphorical dick-measuring contest of two beings approaching the apex. Jake saw several people he suspected to be gods in the crowd frown and slowly back away, a few even teleporting away to avoid getting caught in a fight far beyond their level.

"Bold of you to dare come here," the Viper spoke, his voice calm yet with rage seething right beneath.

"Bold... sure, we can use that word," Yip smiled and tilted his head. "Though I do wonder why you would think that. Is there something wrong with me coming here unannounced? Besides, what are you going to do about it? As I see it, you only have two choices. Either you can be nice and listen to my well-wishes. That--"

He paused and looked to the crowd below, giving them a pitying glance.

- "or you could lose your shit again and massacre everyone who was so silly as to respond to your invitation?"

The Viper's presence flared with bloodlust as Jake took a step back. He moved back together with Vesperia and grouped up around Sandy and Viridia, where he helped cover them with his own presence to not get affected. Sandy and Vesperia both seemed thankful as all three of them observed the two gods with bated breaths.

“Are you willing to risk that I would do just that?” the Malefic Viper asked as energy gathered in his surroundings, amplifying his presence further. For a moment, it looked as if the other god would get suppressed, but...

“Yes, I am,” Yip responded confidently, his aura also flaring even more. Once more, they clashed, and once more, they were equal. “This is our second meeting, and while the first was simply a greeting, today is a declaration. You had a speech, didn’t you? My turn.

“The Order of the Malefic Viper has existed only on the merits of its broken legend for far too long. It is an old story that has waited for a new chapter for far too long. Now, the old forgotten main character returns and thinks he can just pick up the story again, making himself fit into the world once more.”

Yip spoke with confidence as his aura seemed to grow.

“A foolish presumption. While your story has been stagnant, the multiverse has been through several arcs, growing and improving with every story beat hit, every event passed, and every new character coming into their own. What have you truly done? Have you grown stronger? Yes. But it isn’t enough. You have wallowed and drowned in your own pity. Meanwhile, your old enemies have grown, their grudges festered, and your enemies multiplied. You, oh dear Primordial, will come to see that your infallibility is far from fact. With all that said, it would be unkind to rain too much on your wonderful return celebration... and I did promise a present, didn’t I?”

The god took out a golden parchment and began infusing energy into it.

“Now, you are known as a god who loves knowledge, so what gift is better than letting you be the first to know?”

In the air, a giant contract manifested, the words written in some runic language. Jake got the feeling one wouldn't even need a translation skill to understand it. These were words written directly by the system for all to comprehend. Yip spoke as all looked upon the golden words.

"From this day forth, I, Yip of Yore, and my followers have officially signed an alliance with Valhal. Subject only to expiration through the death of the Malefic Viper," Yip of Yore declared with a huge grin. "Personally signed by Valdemar and Gudrun both."

A shockwave of gasps went through the entire hall, and within seconds, several figures teleported away from all over. Entire groups were suddenly gone, but most simply stayed there in disbelief at Yip of Yore's words. Jake was also surprised as he kept staring at the contract. The wording was loud and clear and said exactly what Yip had declared. It was a contract made where Valhal and Yip had allied, with the contract being between him, Valdemar, and Gudrun.

Villy also stared at the contract in disbelief before his face warped into an angry visage. "So that bastard has finally made his intentions clear. So what? Do you think that will matter?"

The Viper rose into the air as the entire world started to change color. A faint dark green aura spread all over, but as it got close to Yip, it stopped. Monochrome energy spread out of Yip, beating back the colors of the Viper's presence, matching him in power. The false sky, which was the ceiling of the massive hall, began to crack, and it looked like the heavens themselves were breaking. Several of the gods still in the crowd sprung up barriers to defend their individual sections, and right next to Jake, a figure appeared. Jake recognized him as the Lord Protector, and the scalekin instantly released a barrier to protect the ones on stage.

They're actually going to fight? Jake questioned. If they did...

Just as it looked like the two gods were about to clash, a new voice suddenly drilled into the minds of everyone present.

“Quite enough now, isn’t it?”

In the sky, between the Viper and Yip, a massive web of strings appeared. Suddenly, all the strings vibrated and snapped, rebuffing both gods as they stumbled back. Right in the epicenter of their clashing auras, where all the strings had just been, a smiling old man appeared.

“Yip of Yore... I believe you are done saying your piece?” the Primordial asked the far younger god.

“A fellow Primordial coming to the rescue of his old pal? Touching,” Yip grinned.

“There is a time and place for everything. It is neither for a fight, and you know that.”

Yip tilted his head and looked at Eversmile for a few moments. “You know... out of all the Primordials, you are the one I have the hardest time pinning down. Always secretive, always hidden. Your motives are a mystery to me, and I can’t even remember the last time I heard about you fighting anymore. Perhaps the Viper is not the only relic of the past?”

Eversmile’s signature smile deepened. “The reason you never hear about my fights is rather elementary.”

Two auras had dominated the entire hall before a third appeared. The monochrome color and dark green aura were both instantly pushed back as both gods were once more rebuffed. Jake had to hold himself back from gaping as he realized.

“I never leave bad karma.”

Eversmile was on another level. His aura surpassed Villy’s and Yip’s by a huge margin... but... something still felt off to Jake.

“Are you truly willing to stand in my way?” the Malefic Viper said with a face full of anger.

Jake’s expression changed into one of confusion as he felt the auras clashing. A memory appeared in his mind from the first time he met the Viper within his divine realm. At that time, the Viper had tried to scare him and-

“Don’t lose your cool.”

The voice of the Viper spoke in his mind. Calm, despite looking filled with rage while floating above.

Jake quickly complied as he returned to just looking confused and surprised beneath his mask. While reading his impression was borderline impossible, he wouldn’t put it above gods.

"I should be saying that, shouldn't I?" Yip of Yore answered the Viper. "But alright. I shall respect the true Primordial and take my leave for today."

He then turned to Jake and looked straight at him. Jake felt the Lord Protector flinch and move into a defensive position as the god above spoke again.

"It wouldn't be proper for our final clash to take place before that of our Chosen, now would it? To ruin his story would be unbecoming," Yip smiled at Jake. "Give him a proper challenge, would you? I at least expect you to prove a worthier opponent to my Chosen than your Patron is to me. I at least look forward to how you do at Nevermore compared to mine. Ah, but considering what you accomplished with the True Royal, perhaps simply slaying your Patron and allowing you a better future would be preferable? No matter what, I must implore you to leave your broken Path behind and find one more worthy of your unique talents."

With those words, he snapped his fingers as space all around him twisted. He threw a final glance towards Eversmile and then the crowd. "Excuse my rudeness today. I simply find it disgusting that so many chose to show up in support of a god whose most significant accomplishment is the biggest disaster in the history of the multiverse. All because he threw a pathetic, childish tantrum. Let's hope you all realize there are those not worthy of reverence."

In the next moment, space collapsed, and he was gone, leaving only Eversmile and Villy left in the air.

Eversmile and Villy looked at each other as the Primordial of karma spoke.

"Fighting here would only have sown bad karma by slaughtering all those present. Do not take my interference as any kind of approval of what you are doing. You still hold the title of Primordial... prove you are worthy of it."

“Are you saying I am not? Are you saying you would be willing to fight me elsewhere?” the Viper shot back.

Eversmile’s grin grew. “No. Ultimately, you are still the Malefic Viper. It would be a needless risk. Now, please, enjoy the rest of your ceremony.”

With that, he was also gone, leaving just the Malefic Viper floating alone. The atmosphere was significantly different from before, and several groups had disappeared as hidden gods had teleported themselves and others away during the commotion.

Villy scoffed as he looked around the hall. “This part of the ceremony is over. We will proceed as planned with the discussions of the Nevermore party happening in the next section. If you choose to believe the words of some upstart, you are free to leave.”

The Viper appeared on the stage among Jake and the others as he spoke again. “We shall reconvene in the inner chambers in an hour. Show up if you dare.”

Jake saw the Lord Protector teleport away with Sandy, Viridia, and Vesperia, and a second later, he himself was teleported away as the Viper took him.

Yip of Yore appeared within the void as a relaxed smile rested on his face. He collected himself as all that had happened ran through his mind, and he felt the power rushing through his body. The story was growing, and his aura grew further as the narrative flowed through his soul.

“That went rather well if I say so myself,” he spoke out loud into the vast nothingness.

“If he had made a move that would have made you come out looking better and created a more potent karmic justification for what is to come,” a second voice said as Eversmile appeared. Yip’s dear scheming partner.

“He seems able of some level of self-control,” Yip said. “Though this appearance of the True Royal and this unique ability of his Chosen does throw a spanner in the works. Having Ell’Hakan kill him outright might result in unnecessary backlash from certain factions.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Some will celebrate it happening, while others will view it as a gross crime against the multiverse. Ultimately it all comes down to the narrative you foster. If the Viper’s Chosen is painted as a true villain who would never have helped any factions anyway, those who would mourn his passing are significantly reduced.”

“You truly don’t like the mortal, huh?” Yip raised an eyebrow. “Messed up that little experiment of yours too much?”

“He introduced several unpredictable variables and derailed the original objective even during his Tutorial. He is a chaotic element in any experiment,” Eversmile shook his head.

“Heh, I will ultimately leave it up to my own Chosen. If anyone can convince the Viper’s to switch sides, it will be him. Imagine that... the Viper is shown as so deplorable that even his own Chosen abandons him and becomes a heretic? That... oh,” Yip said as the storyline manifested in his mind, and the Records of the multiverse allowed him insight.

“It appears there is already doubt in his mind about the Viper,” Yip grinned, feeling like there was more to the Chosen than met the eye. “His reverence for the Viper is far below what one would expect, indicating he isn’t quite as devoted as he should be. Not surprising, considering my Chosen isn’t the most loyal either. These kinds of pinnacle geniuses tend not to be. But he... he gives off Records far more akin to that of a heretic.”

Eversmile nodded. “Interesting. However, if you do wrest him away, I must warn you. Vilastromoz held back his aura today, potentially trying to lead you into rushing the story and initiating the final confrontation too early. If you had fought today, it would have ended badly for you.”

“I am fully aware, and I shall not make the final move before the story arc reaches its zenith. Only then shall the finale play out, and my power will reach its peak,” Yip said, the power rushing through him simply from imagining it.

“Good, as long as you are aware. This will be the one time I will help you, as per our agreement,” Eversmile nodded. “If you wish for assistance again, proper recompense will be required.”

“Just one thing,” Yip of Yore said as he stopped Eversmile before he left. “Yes or no... do you wish to see me realize my narrative?”

Eversmile squinted before nodding. “Yes.”

“To clarify further, you wish to see me kill the Malefic Viper? Your fellow Primordial?”

“Yes,” the Primordial answered, this time without a hint of hesitation.

Grinning, Yip felt great. "Once more, thank's for your assistance."

Eversmile teleported away without saying anything more.

Yip of Yore was not stupid. He knew the Malefic Viper was a schemer and that he had plenty of plans. He even knew the Viper was playing up his emotions today. He knew the Viper had grown far more powerful than he had let shown. He even knew that Eversmile was helping him with his own ulterior motives and that Valhal had other thoughts than simply trying to use him to kill the Malefic Viper.

The reason he wanted to clarify with Eversmile was relatively simple. Eversmile had this one particular thing where he never lied. It was his Path to not lie when directly asked, and he would feel a tangible blowback if he did so, especially to another god at Yip's level. Did he still plan things on his own? Yes, but that was fine.

Ultimately... it didn't matter. Yip of Yore had claimed the narrative, and even the Malefic Viper purposefully trying to mess up the story was part of the plan from the very beginning. His scheming was simply the Viper playing his assigned role. Besides, no matter how much the Viper planned, there was one hole in all his plots. One major flaw in every plan he made.

His Chosen.

An impulsive, emotional, and thoughtless person who, as Eversmile mentioned, was indeed chaos incarnate. Jake Thayne was, based on all Yip had seen, quite the opposite of a schemer. He was more akin to Valdemar. A warrior by heart with an unshakeable will and stoic demeanor. Simply-minded and focused, which didn't allow him to see the full picture.

Meanwhile, Ell'Hakan was a schemer through and through. He had grown up with both guile and brawn and was, in Yip's eyes, nearly perfect. He had everything one would expect of a genius, and the expectations of his performance in Nevermore were high.

Yip smiled as Records evolved around him, the many winding paths of the story clear to him, and he was certain of one thing.

Ell'Hakan would be the key to Yip's victory.

And Jake Thayne, the Viper's downfall.

Chapter 644 - \U201CWhy Does It Have To Be So Complicated?\U201D

Jake appeared somewhere he had not expected to. A vast wasteland stretched out towards him, and he recognized it instantly.

The Divine Realm of the Malefic Viper?

Why had he been teleported here, of all places? Jake frowned as he considered if perhaps the situation was far more serious than he had first thought, and Villy wanted to protect him by sending him there. But that didn't quite seem to fit? Because something had definitely been wrong during their dick-measuring contest.

The Viper had shown himself as weaker than the aura Jake had felt before. While Jake couldn't really distinguish between two extremely powerful gods, he could compare auras. The sheer level of power he

had felt that time within the Viper's realm was far beyond what the god had shown during the ceremony. However, even then, Yip of Yore had been a lot more powerful than Jake had expected him to be.

"You know, I really hoped not having to explain stuff to you," a voice said from behind as Villy appeared. "But it seems like not saying anything is an even bigger risk."

Villy looked serious, also making Jake adopt a serious demeanor. "What do you mean?"

"You noticed Eversmile in the crowd before he appeared," Villy sighed.

"Yeah?" Jake nodded.

"I couldn't."

"What?" Jake asked, confused.

"You may think I am good at stealth, but Eversmile is number one in the entire multiverse. If he does not want to be recognized, you won't. Do you know what his race was before he became a god?" the Viper asked as he waved his hand, summoning something to sit on.

"He looks pretty human, but I have no idea," Jake admitted.

“Eversmile was a Doppelganger. A shapeshifter. When he changes, everything that isn’t the very core of his Truesoul changes with him, making him impossible to spot through any normal means. If he displays none of his power and wants to hide, nobody in the multiverse can find him, period. Even someone like Oras can’t. That is how he can be such a mystery despite having lived so long. He can be anyone at any time,” the Viper explained.

“That’s something. But doesn’t it kind of ruin his disguise that he is always smiling?” Jake asked, surprised that Eversmile had always been a cloak-and-more-cloak kind of guy.

“Perhaps, but I wouldn’t ever want him to stop,” the Viper shook his head.

“Why not?”

“Him smiling is part of his karmic Path... if he released that smile, one of two things will happen. One would be that his Path will break, and as a god, he will be significantly weakened. That or something that has built up for ninety-three eras will be unleashed. I frankly don’t care to find out either way,” Villy shrugged.

“Anyway, this is a sidetrack. The reason why I dragged you here is that a larger game is going on, and you can, annoyingly so, see flaws in what is happening. Your damn intuition may lead to something getting fucked, so rather than risk you saying something dumb or revealing something you shouldn’t, rather just get you up to speed.”

"Alright," Jake nodded. He had known some stuff was going on behind the scenes and that it was related to Ell'Hakan and his Patron god, Yip of Yore. However, some things really bothered him. "Can I ask some things first?"

"Go right ahead."

"I remember you said Yip of Yore is from the ninety-second universe, literally the last one before this. Which makes him only an era old at max if he lived during the integration... how the hell is he so strong then? Or is he not actually that strong?" Jake asked.

Villy looked at Jake as he considered his answer. "Hm, this isn't really common knowledge, so keep it between us, alright?"

"Sure," Jake nodded.

"I think we had a similar conversation before, but becoming a god now compared to in my time is a lot easier. In fact, with each era, it gets easier. The reason for this is indeed that we now know more, and there are more Paths, but that isn't the biggest factor. The biggest factor is simply that the multiverse is, well, bigger," Villy explained, continuing.

"Records are the true limiting factor for all gods to keep progressing. Reaching our level caps is often just a question of time, and as we are all immortal, we got plenty of that. But in order to raise our level caps, we need more Records. There are many ways to get those... but the further you go, the harder it becomes. Your options are simply limited, and you exhaust all opportunities. What is left is but an incredibly slow and arduous grind to try and improve just a tiny bit every few billion years. That is... unless suddenly a huge infusion of new Records appears. Something like the integration of an entirely new universe."

Jake listened on as he thought he understood as the Viper still continued.

"I think an easy way to imagine it is by thinking about it like an old massively multiplayer online game. Each era is an expansion, and each era brings with it an increased level cap. This level cap is still one you have to achieve, but reaching it is far easier than the task of becoming a god in the first place. All you have to do is stay true to your Path and gain levels while continuing to work on your skills and abilities. The level cap also varies from person to person and is individually applied. What it ultimately just means is that the maximum power level a god can reach is set higher in each era compared to the previous one. And that is where Yip of Yore comes in."

"He managed to close the gap?" Jake asked.

"No, it isn't that easy. Yip of Yore is a supreme genius, but one era is still too little time. At least, it would be under usual circumstances. The Path Yip of Yore walks is one of incredible power and, quite frankly, one of the most ambitious ones I have ever seen. He directly claims Records and levels based on his legends, and his way of gaining power is tied directly to his narrative. Every time he proves himself capable of standing before a Primordial, it becomes more true, so imagine what would happen if he killed one?"

"He would genuinely become as powerful as a Primordial," Jake realized.

"Exactly. It would no longer merely be a legend but simply common knowledge that he had the power of a Primordial. He wants to claim the innate power and Records of a title given to the gods seen as the most powerful in the multiverse. To slay a Primordial has never been done before, and if he does become the first, he will establish himself as one of the most powerful gods in existence. Ambitious, to say the least," the Viper said with a smile.

“Wait,” Jake frowned. “But in order for his legend to be a thing, people need to think he is as powerful as you, right? Why not just go full power and fight him to prove that isn’t the case, ending his stupid story prematurely? Or, you know, just kill him outright.”

“It won’t work,” Villy shook his head. “Fact is, Yip of Yore is powerful even without his tricks. I don’t think any of us Primordials could kill him even if we wanted to. That is also why he fought Valdemar first. Because if anyone could kill him, it would have been Valdemar, but Yip knew he wouldn’t. So now it is common knowledge Yip of Yore can escape a fight with the Primordial often recognized as the most powerful in pure combat. Something he can borrow to always ensure he can always escape from me.”

“Besides,” the snake god grinned. “I wouldn’t want him to stop. If I did, I would have done things differently already. And, Jake, while I will give you some rough ideas of what is going on, I cannot tell you the full truth. You merely knowing may ruin everything, and let’s not kid ourselves; I can’t fully trust you won’t let anything slip.”

“Ouch,” Jake said, faking hurt.

“If Ell’Hakan, Yip’s Chosen, wasn’t in the mix, things would be easier, but his Bloodline is tricky and annoying,” the Viper shook his head. “I also wouldn’t call you the most careful with what you say. Shit, my level of carefulness should be quite clear just from me wanting to only discuss this in my divine realm.”

“Fair,” Jake nodded. “So, the thing with Valhal?”

“I was aware it would happen way beforehand,” Villy nodded.

eaglesnove1,coM "Yip showing up?"

"Planned. Shit, I set up his entrance."

"Eversmile?"

"I also knew he would appear and break us up. In fact, pretty much everything today was planned. Granted, I believe both Yip and I agree it was planned as we currently want the story to progress in similar veins," Villy explained.

"How will following his story not end badly for you?" Jake asked. If Yip was truly a threat...

"Maybe it will, maybe it won't. Time will tell, now won't it?" the Viper smiled, clearly not going to answer that one.

"What about that entire deal with Valhal? Is it real?"

"That it is," Villy nodded. "Can't fool the system, which was why it had such an impact. It had the outcome I wanted. Ultimately, while Yip has his own plans, so do I have mine."

"Did you have a hand in the deal being signed in the first place?" Jake asked after thinking a bit.

Villy smiled for a second before sighing.

"I have been gone for a long time, and Yip of Yore isn't wrong when he says the Order is only coasting along on my old reputation. Even the many gods and factions who have shown up and displayed loyalty are still not really dedicated. They are testing the waters, and their levels of belief in my abilities are lacking, to say the least. You saw a lot of factions have already left this ceremony, and the reason why I gave everyone an hour was for them to reconvene and decide their course of action," the Viper explained.

"So, a test of loyalty?" Jake asked.

"More a test of belief. Do they truly think Yip of Yore will be able to kill me? If they do, then abandoning the Order only makes sense. If they don't, and they only see the words of Yip as the delusional bullshit of some upstart, then they will stay. Of course, things are a bit more muddled as some factions probably don't really care much either way but are only here because of you. The United Tribes, Endless Empire, and Automata Legion are prime examples of this."

"Not gonna lie, I was afraid some automata was going to take advantage of everything that happened and would try to kill Vesperia," Jake confessed.

"I had Snappy on standby," Villy dismissed his fears. "Besides, they wouldn't risk it. Making a move like that wouldn't be worth it, even if they did manage to kill her. Unless they also decided to kill you so you couldn't spawn more, that is, which would be an outright declaration of war. Considering their leader is Rigoria, she is smart enough to know that would end badly."

Jake slowly nodded. He thought for a while as he asked something he had been wondering. "Back when we first met, and you unleashed your aura to try and scare me... did you go full force?"

“Yes.”

“I felt Eversmile unleash his aura before,” Jake said as he looked at the Viper. “Give it to me straight. Yip does have a point, doesn’t he? You have fallen behind the other Primordials.”

Villy smiled and leaned back in his chair. “Remember when you asked how strong I was, and I said there wasn’t anyone in the multiverse I believed could truly beat me?”

“Yeah,” Jake nodded, having asked something like that a long time ago.

“That hasn’t changed. Yip’s biggest weakness is his lack of actual knowledge of what happened in the past. Actual knowledge other older gods are aware of. He is running on assumptions, which, granted, are good enough for him. He doesn’t need to actually operate based on the truth or facts, he simply needs to convince enough people of his bullshit and have a strong enough delusion, and his abilities will work.”

“How is his lack of knowledge then a weakness?” Jake asked. Yip just seemed more and more overpowered the more Jake learned about him.

“What he doesn’t know will ruin his story,” Villy smiled mysteriously. “That is all I will say on that. Either way, I want to make it clear that a lot of suspicious and not entirely logical things will happen, and I want you to just focus on your role. My opponent is Yip of Yore, while yours is Ell’Hakan. I am not gonna lie; out of the two of us, you are in the most trouble.”

“Any idea what that fucker is planning?” Jake asked, a bit worried. “Do you think he will go after my family or something?”

That was the thing Jake feared the most happening. That Yip of Yore would try to make Jake lose his cool by going after his parents, sister-in-law, and nephew back on Earth. Because that would definitely work.

“No, he won’t do that,” Villy shook his head. “But not because of you. Doing that would be attacking members of the Court of Shadows, including a Judge. It will include Umbra in a conflict Yip does not want her to participate in and give her an excuse to mobilize. So don’t worry about them, they are safe. No, the next place they will target you is at Nevermore.”

Jake frowned. “Can he attack me there?”

“He won’t attack you. He will compete with you. He will attempt to show the world he is superior to you by performing better than you, and from what I have gathered, Ell’Hakan gathered quite the party with the help of his Patron and the gods who work with him,” Villy said.

“He can fucking try,” Jake scoffed.

“Jake, remember that Nevermore is not solely about combat power. There are other ways to progress in the mega-dungeon and rake in points for the scoreboards. I do have confidence you will win, but your competition isn’t to be taken lightly,” the Viper said in a severe tone.

Jake nodded. "I got it. But... what happens if he cheeses out a win? Will that negatively impact you or risk your plans?"

"Probably not," the Viper shook his head. "But I cannot be sure. Ultimately, I am taking a risk by playing along with Yip of Yore and allowing him to power up more and more. After today he will be even stronger than before, and I am sure he will keep accumulating Records as his plot progresses until he reaches his maximum capacity. Exactly what his peak will look like is the biggest uncertainty, as it is entirely possible he will surpass my expectations. You are right when you said I haven't truly been able to keep up in all aspects, but this is a chance for me to also catch up. I have told you this many times before, but to truly progress, one must take risks. This is a calculated risk, and quite frankly, I think I have him firmly beaten when it comes to math."

"Why does it have to be so complicated?" Jake questioned with a sigh. "Can't we just pick a time and date and get this shit over with?"

Villy grinned and shook his head. "Because those two know they would lose. They need to resort to these kinds of strategies to try and eke out a victory, and while I said I was taking a risk, Yip is taking a far larger one. He may seem like it, but he isn't stupid. He knows that this entire thing will more than likely end either in embarrassing defeat or death, but he also knows what he will get if he wins. Say what you want, but someone willing to put it all on the line like that at least deserves some level of respect."

"I would respect him more if he didn't have to resort to bullshit," Jake scoffed.

"There we have the heretic in you coming out again," the Viper said with a relaxed smile. He looked to the sky of the divine realm for a few seconds before he spoke.

"You know, the second part of the ceremony begins in around forty minutes."

“Yeah?” Jake said.

“I don’t know if it is just you, but I could use a beer after dealing with that guy,” Villy said, looking at Jake with a raised eyebrow.

“Gotta give the factions who want to evacuate some time, too, right?” Jake smiled in agreement.

“For sure, for sure,” the snake god nodded as a table filled with the golden liquid appeared in front of them.

“Say, does Snappy know about all these plans and shit? Dude seemed genuinely scared you were gonna fight,” Jake asked as he took a bottle and flicked off the cap.

“Nah, as I said, I want to limit information as much as possible,” Villy said as he picked up a bottle, the cap simply disappearing as if it had never been there. “You only know because not telling you would probably lead to more trouble.”

“Alright,” Jake said as he took a chug from the bottle. He did wonder how the next part of the ceremony would go after their interruption. Hopefully, things wouldn’t be too awkward.

Oh well, I will see how things are in a bit.

For now, it was drinking time as Villy finally got to give Jake an in-depth interview about his night in a hotel room with a certain succubus.

#### Chapter 645 - Party Introductions

After Jake and Villy had time to wind down, it was time to move on to the next session of the ceremony. The two of them had only discussed what had happened a bit, with the Viper reminding Jake that the entire ceremony so far had effectively been televised across the multiverse, meaning all the big factions now knew what had happened. Giving them all an hour meant the higher-ups back at the headquarters of all the bigger groups could decide on their course of action and allow them to make an “official” decision.

Jake wasn’t gonna lie; he had kind of expected ninety percent or more to leave. Yip had just challenged the Viper and declared he would kill him, taunted him openly, and declared he had entered an alliance with Valhal, with even Eversmile appearing. The situation was now messy as fuck, and their staying could easily be interpreted as choosing a side.

There were some factions Jake felt sure would stay. The Risen and the Order were on quite good terms, the Endless Empire and Automata Legion for obvious reasons, and even the merchant groups he didn’t see leaving.

While the Order did have okay relations with most factions, were they really that good? At most, Jake estimated them to be neutral before Yip’s appearance, and if pissing off others, they wouldn’t view it as worth the risk to stay. Jake had expected the Dragonian Accords and all of the dragon factions to at least pull back a little, the Altmar Empire to probably just leave outright, and for most minor factions to flee for the hills.

The only thing he was slightly right on was the last one. A lot of the minor factions had left. Those who only had mid-tier gods as their strongest didn’t risk offending either side and hoped that just silently slipping out would allow them to get away unnoticed.

All of the big factions had stayed, and from what Jake saw when Villy allowed him a peek, the vibe wasn't even ruined. People almost seemed to not give a shit about what had just happened, and the VIPs were happily drinking away while chatting. Viridia was busy talking to quite a crowd, which included someone from the Risen, a beastfolk from the United Tribes, an elf, a few humans, and even more scalekins of different variants, including dragons in humanoid forms.

"Gonna send you there now," Villy said after a bit.

"You aren't coming?" Jake asked.

"If I did, I would suppress others. No, we will meet for the final part, where it will pretty much just be gods present. I also got word that quite the candidate has been brought here by an old acquaintance. You can meet them later, so look forward to it. Now be off," Villy said, waving him off.

"You're still gonna be there in disguise, right?" Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You know me so well," the Malefic Viper grinned as Jake was teleported out of the divine realm.

Miranda wasn't going to needlessly beat around the bush. If she still had the physiological function to do so, she would have quite literally pissed her pants during the ceremony when the gods appeared and flared their auras. The only reason why it had not turned into a massacre was that no intent or will to kill had been infused into it, but she and everyone knew that at any moment, any of the gods could have had a stray thought which would have killed trillions.

Luckily, nothing like that had happened, and the entire situation resolved itself. Miranda didn't even try to think about what was going on and the wider political implications of it all but just focused on moving

forward and the task at hand. Most others seemed to adopt a similar attitude, and most of the larger factions seemed to truly not care much.

This did mean they could move on rather swiftly without anyone truly bringing up what had just happened. Miranda did not doubt that most had just checked in on what the gods of their factions wanted to do, and once they got the go-ahead to proceed as normal, they did just that. It was only at the so-called after-party gods would appear en-masse, and there was a chance for the topic of Yip to be discussed.

For now, it was just mortal politicians. Miranda had been teleported into the large hall that – while still massive – was ultimately still created for human-sized individuals. It had long tables with food of different sorts everywhere, and Miranda stood back as she saw people teleport in by the hundreds every minute as the hour before the time to reconvene passed.

Few approached Miranda, and she was just fine with that. Everyone instead sought out Viridia or other high-ranking officials of the Order, all identifiable by their cloaks with the motif of the Malefic Viper on them. Miranda didn't have a cloak and probably looked out of place if not for the fact that she stood with a Judge from the Court of Shadows and Maria for a while before both moved away to discuss with others. Maria to some beastfolk from the United Tribes and Caleb towards someone Miranda guessed to also be from the Court.

Miranda did ask Felix how he felt about what had just happened. This was her biggest regret, as perhaps the primary reason no one else came to talk to her during this entire time was the rambling fanatic who wouldn't stop going on about how honored he was to see not just one but two Primordials in person. Especially how dying to them would have been the greatest thing ever, as that would mean he had been spared at least a smidgen of their attention.

She could only sigh in relief as, finally, the hour was up, and it was time to move on with the program.

Jake appeared in a small side room with a door leading into the main hall. His sphere instantly covered a good part of the large hall ahead, but it was still far too large for him to see it all, so he quickly released a Pulse of Perception. The design of these inner chambers was one long-ass hall with rooms on both sides, with Jake estimating there to be about twenty rooms and each side, with only one on each end. Jake was at one of the end rooms.

The rooms were for discussions behind closed doors, while the hall was large enough to accommodate everyone invited to this after-party. This was especially the case after so many minor factions had left, leaving plenty of room for everyone. These minor factions would only have been allowed one representative each, with the more prominent factions having small groups. Well, there were quite a few cases of even smaller factions having duos, but always with one thing in coming: one of them was an early C-grade below level 210.

In other words, people were sent to compete with those who joined him shortly.

Standing in the room, Jake waited, and soon enough, he was joined by his would-be party members.

Sylphie, the Sword Saint, and the Fallen King teleported into the room as Jake turned to greet them.

“Hello there,” Jake said.

“Ree!” Sylphie responded by flying forwards Jake and circling him a few times. She finally landed on his shoulder and perched herself there, looking cute while doing it. Sylphie was still young but knew she had to be “cool” and look “awesome” to show off her prowess as Jake’s party member. Jake wondered if anyone would dare challenge her, considering she would probably stay sitting on his shoulder for this entire party. Probably not, but primarily because their attention would be focused on the sole other human in the group.

"This is quite the situation," the Sword Saint commented, obviously referring to what had happened during the ceremony. "This Yip of Yore strikes me as a troubling individual indeed. He is the Patron of Ell'Hakan, the one who invaded Earth, correct?"

"He is, yeah," Jake confirmed. "And yes, he does look like trouble. So much trouble I will leave it up to the Viper to figure out what to do and not think about it too much."

He said this not only because it was his genuine thoughts but because he wanted to avoid talking about it in case he said something he shouldn't. There was one thing to add, though. "But I was informed that Ell'Hakan is also heading to Nevermore with the intent to compete."

"Oh?" the Sword Saint said as he seemed to consider something. "Odd. Why would he have allowed the death of the Unique Lifeform when he planned on doing Nevermore? Is that not counterproductive? Unless he has four individuals surpassing that creature."

"The Ashen Phantom Devourer was not truly on his side. It was simply a temporary ally, convinced that working with this Ell'Hakan would prove beneficial. I doubt it would have wanted to attend Nevermore with him, much less a group of party members he shows up with. That is assuming the Devourer even knew about Nevermore and had any interest in participating," the King said.

"The Unique Lifeform would have known of it," the Sword Saint said. "At least it would have soon. I questioned my Patron if our going to Nevermore won't result in the upcoming system event becoming far easier than intended, and he informed me that Nevermore is expected. The Wyrmgod, working with the system, will begin sending out tokens to the new universe in a year to many of those who manage to reach C-grade, allowing them to teleport directly there and home again."

"Huh, I hadn't heard of that," Jake commented.

“Presumably, it has been like that for many eras already. It was just never relevant to us,” the old man said.

“I guess,” Jake nodded. “Anyway, are you all ready to make our grand appearance? The hall ahead is pretty filled, and there are a lot of early C-grades among them. Competition for you all, I reckon.”

“I shall welcome any and all,” the Sword Saint confidently smiled.

“If they wish to indulge in their own ignorance and delusion, they are free to issue a challenge,” the King scoffed.

“Ree!” Sylphie said, making it clear she would take shit from nobody.

“Let’s make our glorious entrance then,” Jake smiled.

He and the others walked towards the double doors leading into the hall ahead, and as they got close, the Sword Saint and Sylphie both unleashed their Blessing-infused auras. The King, refusing to be outdone, released an aura infused with nobility and the unique signature of, well, a Unique Lifeform. Jake held his own aura back on purpose to not steal the limelight.

Jake saw that attention had already switched to the door as Jake opened it, the gazes of all those present landing on the group of four as they entered. A masked man with mostly black armor and a

black cloak, a green bird in a vest on his shoulder, an old man in a dark blue robe carrying a sword, and a willow tree-like being with bony ivory claws and feet, floating a few centimeters off the ground.

Definitely the average dungeon group, if Jake said so himself.

This was the first time the group was revealed, and Viridia was ready as she loudly announced them.

“Let’s all welcome the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his three party members for Nevermore. Allow me the honor of introducing them,” Viridia spoke as she teleported over and stood beside the four of them.

“Firstly, we naturally have the Chosen. He is a multi-talented fighter and is especially skilled at long-range combat while also naturally a skilled alchemist specializing in poisons. Then we have the Sylphian Hawk, a beast variant I am sure none of you have heard of before, but let me assure you, her talents are remarkable, and her wind magic is multi-purpose. Moreover, despite being a hawk, her sylph-related heritage shines through, allowing her to also display properties and unique talents often reserved only for elementals. Last but not least, she is recognized by Stormild, the Primordial.”

Jake had to admit he wasn’t a fan of revealing information related to what they could do, but Viridia and others had assured him there truly was no way around it. The factions that really wanted to know could find out through various means, and not sharing it could lead to misunderstandings when it came to recruiting a final party member.

Saying outright what their roles were also meant that some swordsman would know that trying to join as a fifth member would be a waste of time. He would instead have to target the Sword Saint for his spot. Also, it wasn’t like the information given provided anything specific many high-level evaluation skills wouldn’t already give. Saying Sylphie was related to sylph-stuff wasn’t exactly a spoiler.

“Next, we have the Fallen King. A Unique Lifeform with powerful telekinetic magic and some soul magic. Ah, does he even need an introduction? I don’t think I have to explain why a Unique Lifeform is more than qualified. All I will add is that he can fulfill nearly all direct combat roles unrelated to long-range combat and healing,” Viridia said, getting a few chuckles from her, even bothering to explain that a Unique Lifeform was strong.

Shit, it wouldn’t be an understatement to say the Fallen King was more qualified to be in the party than Jake. Just by being a Unique Lifeform, everyone knew they were dealing with an apex creature. On a side note, the Fallen King was described as not good at long-range combat, which was the truth. He was more classified as a mid-range fighter, as his effective combat range was far lower than someone like Jake. Then again, Jake would call himself an ultra-long-range fighter.

“Finally, we have the human known as the Sword Saint from the Chosen’s home planet. I should add here that all three of them are technically from his planet, so while this is not unique to him, then seeing another human recognized by the Chosen should give you all pause. Also, quite a bold name to call himself the Sword Saint, isn’t it? But that title is not one to be taken lightly. He is a true swordsman, recognized and blessed by Aeon Clok, no doubt also meaning he has some time magic hidden up his sleeves. Oh, and did I mention... he is a Transcendent.”

People were already silent before, but it still seemed to get heavier after she announced that fact. Jake and the others had discussed if they wanted to reveal it, and the Sword Saint had ultimately said he saw no reason not to. Another Transcendent would be able to tell right away, and announcing it would only make their party seem stronger. Additionally... the old man said he wanted to at least have something to brag about, standing next to a Unique Lifeform, a Chosen of a Primordial with a Bloodline, and some mythical half-hawk, half-elemental never-seen-before creature.

The many gazes upon them were evaluating the group both individually and as a collective. Jake, in turn, scanned the room and the many people looking at them. He focused solely on the C-grades among them capable of joining their trip to Nevermore. There were a few hundred at least, and going through them just with a cursory glance, he found the majority sorely lacking and, for some reason, ninety-percent female.

“You will all get ample opportunity to chat with these outstanding individuals from the new universe later, but before we do that, let us move onto something you have all no doubt looked forward to,” Viridia said and displayed a big smile. “Gift opening time.”

Oh shit, Jake thought as now everyone looked at him. Usually, he would feel awkward about it, but the embarrassment was drowned out by a far more powerful emotion:

Greed for some of that sweet, sweet loot.

Chapter 646 - Chosen Ceremony = Loot 7.0

As Jake had been briefed on earlier, then the majority of presents would not be handed to him directly. Most would go through the Order and simply be delivered to his residence, or somewhere else he designated, with Miranda or Viridia briefing Jake on any important things he may want to bring along to Nevermore.

Only gifts from the top factions would be handed over directly and opened in front of everyone. Even if the gift was not one that could just be handed over, they would still voice what it was. This was not really for Jake but for the factions handing over the gift. It was their way of showing intent toward the new Chosen of the Malefic Viper and, at the same time, flex on other factions. In some ways, this did benefit Jake as the gifts given openly had to be impressive in some way, or it would be an embarrassment to show everyone how shitty gifts you could give.

Viridia led Jake to one side of the room as the tiled floors raised themselves to form a small platform. Jake honestly thought this was overdoing it, but he knew these kinds of theatrics mattered to others. The many people present all observed him as Viridia invited him up to the stage before the Hall Master turned to address them.

"I do wonder what the denizens of the multiverse wish to gift our Chosen, considering his rather unique status as someone from a new universe and still a C-grade. Even more so when you consider his upcoming trip to Nevermore," Viridia said with a big smile, pretty much hinting to the faction they better have something useful.

"Now, who would like to go first?" Viridia asked.

Jake was pretty damn sure this wasn't a real question, as only one person responded. A Risen wearing a golden crown and immaculate robes stepped forward and bowed. "The Risen would be more than honored to do so."

The man wasn't some low-level person either. He was an S-grade and even had a Divine Blessing from the Blightfather himself.

"One of the Ghost Kings of the Risen. A title given to those who are deemed to have a high chance of reaching godhood," Viridia informed him with telepathy.

"Considering the Chosen's affinity to alchemy, we made some inquiries and believe that these gifts will be more than fitting, especially considering your adventure to Nevermore. Specialties from the depths of the Ghostlands itself, the Blightsea," the Ghost King said as he kneeled and presented two items.

One of them was a box, and the other a black flask. Jake used telekinesis to accept both items as the Risen retreated a bit, giving Jake the opportunity to check out his things. This was pretty much mandatory, and something Jake had been briefed on. He needed to "show off" the items to everyone. That was part of the deal.

As he opened the box and saw ten black roots within, intense death mana was released, and he flashed a pleased smile beneath his mask after using Identify.

[Blightroot (Legendary)] – A root found on the shores of the Blightsea. Contains incredibly dense death affinity energy and is extremely potent when mixed with necrotic toxins. Has been pre-primed for alchemy, making it easier to work with than usual Blightroots. Direct consumption for non-Risen is not recommended.

They were pretty fucking good. Without delay, Jake also checked the flask

[Dead Man's Flask (Legendary)] – A flask containing Blightsea Shore Water. Indestructible to anyone below S-grade. The water within will never lose potency, no matter how much time passes. The Interior is spatially expanded.

He lifted it up and took the small cork off, and poured out a single droplet which he also quickly Identified.

[Blightsea Shore Water (Ancient)] – Water that has been taken from the shores of the Blightsea. Contains incredibly dense death affinity energy and is extremely potent when mixed with necrotic toxins. This water is primed for alchemical use, making it far easier to work with. Direct consumption for non-Risen is not recommended.

The liquid floated there for a while, long enough for everyone around to see it, before Jake put it back into the bottle and the cork back on before he nodded.

"I hope the gifts are to your satisfaction, Chosen of the Malefic One," the Ghost King said.

“Thank you, and I thank the Risen for their gift. I am certain they will all prove useful,” Jake said, getting a smile from the man as he bowed one more time before retreating back into the crowd, with everyone else nodding and a few clapping at the exchange.

Jake just felt relieved he had managed to receive a gift that was actually useful. They quickly moved on as Viridia introduced the next guest who would give gifts. This guy was from some merchant group that he hadn’t heard of before.

And with that... it began.

“We at the Evergreen Conglomerate have long considered what we could possibly offer the Chosen of Primordial and finally settled on a gift we believe is only proper: assistance in establishing your dominance within the newly integrated universe. Thus we would be honored to offer the Chosen one thousand D-grades and one million E-grade slaves who are all natives of the ninety-third to help populate and expand the Order of the Malefic Viper. Naturally, they will come with resources to make the transition as easy as possible, too,” the merchant said as he bowed deeply.

Nods of approval and comments on how good a gift it was came from all around as Jake practiced his poker face. What the actual fuck? Like, he knew he would get slaves, but a million fucking people? That was just... insane. How was he even supposed to house them? Luckily, he had discussed this plenty with Miranda before. He simply nodded, not voicing a single one of his thoughts. “Very well. Go through the Order to handle all logistics.”

“As the Chosen commands,” the man smiled as he bowed out and walked down from the stage, getting more claps as people clearly thought it was a great gift. Why they thought this was quite obvious too...

Because the next three people did the same thing, putting Jake's total count of new slaves to five million. Naturally, they had to praise others giving slaves if they had the exact same fucking idea too.

Finally, after those three, it was then time for someone Jake actually wanted to receive a gift from. A high elf woman wearing a white dress with golden embroidery walked up the steps toward him as Viridia gave a quick brief.

"A princess from the Altmar Empire. Her father is an S-grade system-recognized king who rules several galaxies, with her mother also an S-grade from one of the highest-level noble families in the entire empire. Also, she is one of the people here as a potential party member."

"I greet the Chosen," the high elf bowed as she went on stage. She took out a small box and presented it to Jake as she spoke. "Per the wishes of the Chosen, relayed by my little cousin who privately discussed with your excellency earlier, we have prepared an item specifically for the Chosen."

Her words were purposeful in communicating that the Altmar Empire had talked with him beforehand and that they had a personal connection while also explaining their gift and why it was so special. She also sprinkled in that she was family with Izil, though from what Jake remembered, Izil was not from some high-level nobility family. So that entire cousin thing was probably a hard stretch that was only true on a technical level.

Jake graciously accepted the box and opened it to reveal a ring. Just what Jake had hoped to get to replace his current Altmar Signet, and he used Identify with high expectations as he already felt the dense energy packed into the small piece of jewelry.

He was not disappointed.

[Altmar Signet of Supremacy (Legendary)] – A ring presented by the Altmar Empire to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. This ring is made of an unknown but extremely energy-dense metal, with an unknown gem of immense power embedded in it. This ring was originally based on the Trial Signet design but has been further refined and improved to make a fitting gift for a Chosen. The first time the wielder equips the ring, they will become able to distribute the signet's energy into whatever stats they desire. Distributing any of the stats will make the ring Soulbound. A brief recharge period is required between each re-distribution of stats. Stats cannot be redistributed during combat. Enchantments: +5000 stats (undistributed). Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race.

What Jake saw was the Altmar Signet, but better in every conceivable way. Five thousand fucking stats packed into one small ring was utterly insane and surpassed all items he had seen prior. Then again, the ring only gave stats with no other functionalities, which was probably why packing so many into it was even possible. Well, Jake said no other functionalities... except for the ability to redistribute stats repeatedly.

Jake's current ring could be set once, and then it would be Soulbound and locked forever. This one he could re-configure on the fly if he needed some other stats or to play around with stat caps. Jake wanted to play around with it there and then but knew he would have to wait till later. One thing was certain, though: with this ring, he had hit the stat cap from equipment and even gone well beyond, allowing him to get more and more out of every level-up as the cap increased. Jake was even able to get the stats he wanted... and as he could change stats, nothing stopped him from making it give 5000 Perception.

In conclusion, the ring was bloody insane, and Jake did all he could to not have a giant grin on his face. That would be unbecoming, after all.

"I sincerely thank the Altmar Empire, the ring surpasses my expectations," Jake said, making the high elf smile as she slowly retreated away. More claps all around, though, for some reason, people seemed to think this gift was somehow lesser than the damn slaves.

Only people related to Jake knew the ring was infinitely more useful.

Things progressed as expected, with four more factions coming up and offering him various miscellaneous alchemical items and specialties of theirs. Oh, and a few slaves, too, because why not? Jake had honestly not believed it when Izil and everyone else had mentioned that the majority would offer slaves, but that did turn out to be the case.

The only good thing was that because so many offered it, Jake could act less and less thankful every time and simply nodded when they mentioned the gift of slaves. After these four, the ones who only gifted slaves didn't even want to come up to the stage anymore, and those who did offer other items along with slaves only spoke of it as an addition.

Not that it was much of a comfort... because they were already up to fifteen fucking million slaves. More than many countries pre-system. Jake already felt bad for Miranda when he saw her stand in the hall with a hollow look on her face.

When Jake heard from Viridia that the next group was also from some merchant group, he wanted to scream, but then she mentioned which merchant group. Golden Road Emporium. Jake remembered that was the one Sultan and Renato were both in, and as Viridia added, it was the biggest merchant faction in the multiverse.

The one who offered the gift was an S-grade dark elf that Jake naturally didn't know, but Viridia informed him he was one of the people working on issues related to the ninety-third universe.

"We at the Golden Road Emporium spent a long time considering what kinds of gifts we fought suitable for the Chosen. Anyone can simply offer slaves, but we would like to offer something even better. Knowledge and training for those who join the Chosen," the dark elf said with a smile while taking a dig at all the slave gifters.

“My associate, a merchant working close with the Chosen, gave us the idea to diverge from the other merchant alliances, and we have thus prepared two gifts. One is a set of special formation discs that can be used to summon a projected expert from the Golden Road headquarters, capable of teaching those interested in their crafts. Dungeon engineering, construction, enchanting, any kind of profession. This will be for a period of ten years, with thousands of experts ready to serve the Chosen.”

Jake slowly nodded along at the gift he had quite frankly not even considered, but... that actually sounded kind of useful? While most people he knew had damn good teachers – if they even needed one - it was something entirely different for Earth as a whole. Granted, Jake didn't really care overly much about how everyone else was doing, but he could see it give him some good PR to pretty much create public system schooling. If they had these experts teach others who could then go on to teach themselves... yeah, that could be useful. Throwing a glance at Miranda, he saw her eyes were practically shining. Definitely seemed like a good thing.

Jake happily accepted the spatial ring that contained these formation discs as the dark elf looked slightly nervous before bringing out the next item.

“The second is not a gift to the Chosen's forces but for the Chosen himself and was specifically recommended by your associate. We would like to offer the Puzzle Box of the Seeker. A box created by the famous god of puzzles and secrets, the Seeker, filled with mana puzzles. This one is designed for mortals but is not one to be beaten in but a few millennia. We hope it can bring the Chosen entertainment and challenges for ages to come.”

Murmurs were heard all around as people seemed to question a gift such as this. Jake himself was also confused about what kind of gift this was. It didn't at all fit the prior mold of what was given. Still a bit confused; Jake used Identify on it.

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level.

Jake saw the Divine rarity and was incredibly surprised. Then he read the rest of the description. He stood there and stared at the box still held out by the nervous dark elf before he finally accepted it.

The entire cube was about the size of a Rubik's cube. It was made entirely of some kind of metal and had odd patterns covering its surface with confusing scripts. As it was his gift, Jake quickly tried infusing some energy into it, and instantly he felt like his mind had shifted somewhere else. An odd scribble of lines appeared in his mind, and without thinking much, Jake "fixed" them, inadvertently clearing the first level as the puzzle box bound to him forever.

A new level appeared, and Jake finally realized what he was dealing with.

"This is awesome," he muttered, completely forgetting the demeanor he was supposed to adopt. The box reminded him of the practice cauldron Villy had allowed him to play with before he returned to Earth after the tutorial, but this one seemed way better. Jake nearly lost himself and wanted to try and second level, but he snapped out of it after a small nudge from Viridia and returned to the real world.

Jake collected himself as he smiled at the merchant.

"A wonderful gift," Jake said. "I do enjoy these kinds of challenges. I am sure it will prove incredibly entertaining and a fruitful endeavor."

The dark elf had already heard Jake mutter before, and he only got happier as Jake praised them. Jake was pretty damn sure Sultan had been involved in this, as he faintly remembered once mentioning to the merchant that if he could find something like the practice cauldron, it would be awesome. Hopefully, he would get a promotion.

Sadly, they had to move on, and Jake stored his gift away, pretty damn happy with what he had gotten. All in all, he had gotten some good gifts, and this entire event had been nice... at least, he thought that.

Until it was his turn.

Jake's mood, which had been at its peak, suddenly fell as he got a bad feeling. He saw the next person walking up, and his stomach sank.

Felix...

The madman.

"Chosen of the Malefic One!" Felix kneeled deeply as he went on stage. All around, Jake saw a few people cringing back, recognizing the fanatic as a member of the Primordial Church. "To have the privilege of being allowed in your presence and presenting you with the accumulation of my life's work and the sincerity of the Primordial Church is the greatest honor imaginable!"

He had tears in his eyes as he said this, and Jake felt like activating Wings to escape.

But it was too late.

“This is not simply a sculpture. Not simply mine and my Patron’s efforts. Nay, it is a statue created from the Chosen’s enlightened vision of the Malefic Viper himself!”

Oh... oh no.

“Behold!” Felix yelled. “The Vision of the Malefic Primordial’s Chosen!”

In a bright flash created from literally destroying the spatial item it had been transported in, the fruits of Felix’s labor appeared, making Jake’s eyes open wide as gasps appeared throughout the hall at the revelation of “sculpture.”

Felix looked at it proudly, like his greatest dream had come true simply by being allowed to display it.

Yet all Jake saw was a nightmare.

Chapter 647 - Behold, The True Vision Of The Malefic Viper's Chosen!

Why? Why had he done it? Jake briefly remembered some stupid ideas he had shown Felix, but... why? Why had that sculpture-loving moron thought this was a good idea? Should Jake have seen this coming?

No... no, it was too late to consider any of these things. Now, all he could do was damage control as he stared at the monstrosity in front of him.

The statue was nearly three meters tall and composed of three elements. Jake barely registered the awe, claps, and confusion of all those around him as they all closely studied the statue, and he, more than anything, just wanted to rush forward and break it.

It depicted a large beer bottle with a black snake identical to the one Jake had seen in the mural depicting the Malefic Viper way back in the Challenge Dungeon coiling around it. Out of the top of the bottle sprung not beer but a large mushroom, with the Malefic Viper's fangs open about to bite down on the thing from above.

The craftsmanship was ridiculously detailed. Every single scale was perfectly created; the pupils of the Viper almost looked alive, and the beer bottle looked to be made of brown glass, despite being some kind of marble-like rock. The mushroom even looked soft, and it had a slight depression on the top, just where the Viper was about to bite down.

Jake just kept staring at it as his eyes opened wide when he noticed one detail.

No... oh, for fuck sake...

He saw it. The beer Jake had shown back then was based on his favorite brand. On this brand, the label was slightly raised and on the glass itself, making it look nice. However, on the statue, rather than the beer brand, Jake had replaced it with something else when he made his silly mana constructs. Something far more stupid, as Jake – in his defense – had made this as a joke. With cursive letters written in an overly artistic way, it displayed three words.

Warning: Danger Noodle

Jake wanted to not only break the statue but punch Felix into submission. What made it worse was the sculptor standing there, looking prouder than he had any right to. Then, to make matters worse, the fucker spoke to him in a reverent tone.

“Oh, Chosen of the Malefic One, only one piece remains... would you honor me and place your blessed hands upon the statue and give it your approval?” Felix asked with his eyes practically glowing as he looked expectantly at Jake.

The impulse to yell “fuck no” was strong, but... everyone was looking at him. Looking at him with expectations of him to truly bless the abomination before him. He remembered the conversation he had with Miranda and Vesperia, and he knew... he had to accept it.

“Very well,” Jake spoke, trying to sound dignified despite the derpy statue. He moved forward and placed his hand on it as he infused his energy and “approved of it.”

Villy could still refuse it, but... of course, the asshole instantly gave the damn statue a thumbs-up

A moment after his hand touched the statue, the entire hall rumbled. A dark green aura spread throughout as momentarily it felt like the Malefic Viper himself had descended, and the eyes of the statue began to glow dark green. Intense energy was emitted as he saw the fangs almost look like those of an actual beast, and a single dark droplet fell onto the mushroom.

Everyone around him kneeled as Felix kowtowed. “Praise the Malefic One! Praise the glorious True Vision of the Malefic’s Chosen!”

Jake used Identify on the statue as he wanted to gape.

[True Vision of the Malefic Viper's Chosen (Mythical)] – A statue depicting the Malefic Viper's glory as envisioned by his Chosen. Made with unrivaled reverence by a creator who willingly dedicated their entire life to its existence and the direct support of his Patron, the Eternal Servant. Through their efforts, a miracle has occurred. Blessed and approved by the Malefic One and his Chosen himself, a true myth then born. This statue is indestructible to any mortal and shall never decay as long as the Malefic One and his Chosen persist. Enchantments: Significantly increases the mana regeneration of anyone in its presence. Increases the potency of all non-combat alchemical applications of skills carrying the name of the Malefic Viper. Inspires reverence. Toxins will slowly accumulate within the depiction of the Malefic One, dripping from the fangs after enough has gathered. Takes approximately ten years per drop of venom, dependent on the environment. Must be placed within the territory of the Malefic Viper.

A fucking mythical rarity statue created from a bad joke. A really, really bad joke that the fanatic sculptor had taken way too far. To make matters worse, Jake was the only one who seemed to have a problem with it. He did see Caleb try really fucking hard to hold back a grin, Miranda resisting a facepalm, and Maria outright failing as she chuckled under her breath. The Sword Saint just looked on with admiration, clearly not understanding the dumb joke, with the Fallen King unreadable and Sylphie clearly approving.

As for everyone else, they saw nothing wrong with it from the looks of it. When Jake spotted the fucking Viper himself also hiding in the crowd with the fakest-looking face of reverence Jake had ever seen, he nearly lost it.

Jake kept staring at the statue and failed to hold back his curiosity once more. He used Identify on the droplet that fell from the Viper's fang and landed on the mushroom. He instantly regretted that too.

[Vision's Venom of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – A single droplet of pure concentrated energy and Records related to the Malefic Viper. Significantly increases the potency of any toxin it is mixed with. Using this venom during the creation of any alchemical toxin increases the chance of activating Malefic

Viper's Poison, empowering the final product with the Records of the Malefic Viper. If used by the Chosen himself, the activation of Malefic Viper's Poison is ensured if the created item is applicable.

Why does it have to be so good!? Jake cursed internally. If it had just been shit, he would have felt way better, but it was actually so fucking good it was infuriating. Malefic Viper's Poison was a skill Jake had only triggered twice in his life during alchemy due to how rarely it activated, but now he had a way to ensure it. As for the question of ensuring it was worth it... well...

[Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper stalks its prey and needs only to strike once as venom devours its prey. Increases the potency of all created poisons. Grants the ability to craft a poison with a rarity above that of your Concoct Poison skill if certain conditions are met. The poison may at most be upgraded to the rarity of the Malefic Viper's Poison skill (Ancient). Allows poison not to lose efficiency for a long period of time after being applied to a weapon.

With his newest evolution, every craft using one of these droplets would always result in an ancient rarity poison. Even if Jake took two shit-tier ingredients and threw them together to make an inferior-rarity necrotic poison, the skill would activate and upgrade it to an ancient-rarity one. It was pretty much a way for Jake to create a "trump card" poison that was better than what he usually had.

Jake stared at the statue and the droplet as he heard the clamoring from all around. Discussions of what different parts of the statue could mean, praise of the workmanship, and admiration towards the craftsman. Especially the three words on the bottle were heavily discussed. Jake was honestly expecting to get a dozen levels for being a heretic, but... no.

"The meaning in those words... truly profound," an old-looking S-grade elf from the Altmar Empire nodded.

“Indeed,” another agreed. “A warning, followed by directly stating danger, finished with the invitation to dine... truly encapsulates the Path of the Malefic Viper. Scheming, dangerous, yet approachable in some cases.”

“The bottle design is interesting,” another noted. “A bottle that does not fit the regular design of potion or poison bottles but is clearly filled with poison based on the potent mushroom sprouting from it. Finally, the Malefic One’s stance, capable of striking the mushroom at any point, yet waiting to let his venom accumulate... the patience it captures. The willingness to nurture a toxin till perfection.”

More similar comments came from all over, with but a handful of people present truly knowing what was going on. Felix simply stood there with the biggest grin imaginable on his face as he was showered with praise from all around. After a few more minutes, Felix finally spoke once more.

“Needless to say, the Primordial Church and I dedicate this sculpture to the Chosen and the Order of the Malefic One,” Felix once more said with a massive bow.

Jake looked at him for a while. He wanted to punch him. He really did. But Jake held himself back. “I thank you and the Primordial Church.”

Claps echoed throughout the hall as Viridia called some people to bring the damn thing away, and Jake hated that the consensus seemed to be that the Primordial Church were the winners so far for this ceremony when it came to gifts.

Would I get levels if I broke it? Maybe... but... I want that venom... fuck. Wait, can I even break that thing?

At least he would only have to look at the damn thing every ten years to get one of those drops of venom, right?

The ceremony could finally continue with the statue cleaned up and Felix now in a corner, surrounded by admirers. However, it quickly became clear not many factions were interested in going up now as they feared their gifts would be viewed as lesser after the “best gift” had just been given.

Luckily, there were still three major factions yet to gift anything. The Automata Legion, the Endless Empire, and the United Tribes. The Draconian Accords would apparently give gifts behind the scenes and, from what Viridia informed him, were scrambling a bit as two of the nine Dragonflights feared Jake wasn't very keen on them.

Jake had expected these three major factions to gift anything here and now... but what he got instead was Viridia informing him of a change in plans.

“The United Tribes, Endless Empire, and Automata Legion would prefer to discuss this entire matter between closed doors, and the Endless Empire wants the True Royal present if possible. I can refuse them, but I shall leave it up to your discretion. Their gifts may or may not be better based on how this private discussion goes,” Viridia said.

“Alright, let's have a private chat,” Jake agreed. “One with gods present, I presume?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“Alright, go right ahead and end this gifting part of the ceremony then since no one else seems interested in coming up,” Jake told her.

Virida sent another mental confirmation and did just that.

“It appears none are keen on trying to match the Primordial Church? I cannot say I fault them,” Viridia said in a partly joking tone. No one commented, making it clear there indeed weren’t more who wanted to go up on stage.

“The Order of the Malefic Viper and the Chosen thanks you all for your wonderful gifts, and anything not handed directly to the Chosen will naturally be presented to him afterward. I have just been informed that the United Tribes, Endless Empire, and the Automata Legion shall have private discussions with the Chosen and the Malefic One, so sadly, the Chosen will have to leave us for now. Everyone is naturally free to discuss in his absence, and the Chosen shall return. I am sure there is plenty to talk about, isn’t there? Once more, I thank you all, and unless there is anyone we missed, let us move on.”

There were no objections as everyone clapped again and thanked Jake for his time. It felt a bit weird, but Jake stayed dignified. “Thank you all for your intentions and contributions.”

With that, Jake stood up. For a brief moment, the presence of the Malefic Viper descended as Jake was teleported, disappearing from the room, along with one other random guy in the crowd who totally hadn’t been Villy in disguise.

With Jake’s disappearance, the focal point of the ceremony was temporarily gone. This allowed the factions present to begin discussing internally, and with Viridia remaining behind, she naturally had many who wanted to discuss with her. Plans were even made about where to establish more branches of the Order of the Malefic Viper in other universes, preferably close to these factions, to make cooperation easier. While teleportation was widely used in the multiverse, it wasn’t something that one could constantly do. It took a lot of resources to maintain and establish, and unless a god wanted to spend all their time operating a teleportation circle, teleporting across large sections of entire universes wasn’t possible.

Logistics, investments, trade deals, and potential admittance of more students to the Order were discussed. The matter of Yip of Yore wasn't even brought up. People perhaps simply couldn't imagine a reality where a Primordial actually died, so the worst case they saw was the Viper possibly losing and having to recuperate for a while, but for him to actually die? Impossible.

These discussions were primarily reserved for the high-ranking individuals of the factions and those of higher grades. It was why they were there. This left many who were not there for solely political reasons. Individuals who all happened to be recent C-grades with levels between 200 and 209.

Their focus was on three people and three people only. The Sylphian Hawk, the Unique Lifeform known as the Fallen King, and the human who dared call himself a Sword Saint.

Miranda didn't have much reason to stay around at the ceremony hall as she had other important matters to deal with. No one knew she worked directly for Jake but simply believed her to be Viridia's assistant or maybe just a young talent they wanted to bring along. Either way, people showed little interest in her and considering she wasn't even C-grade yet, no one viewed her as a potential party member either.

This allowed her to silently slip out and head somewhere quieter where she could finally get a grasp on her upcoming workload. She needed to be prepared, after all. Because she knew she would soon be utterly swarmed.

She had just gotten a headcount for slaves. One counting all those who had simply gifted behind the scenes. The problem was... the total number had exceeded her expectations. One also had to consider where all these people would be sent. They were natives of the ninety-third universe... and bringing them to the first universe and then back to the ninety-third wasn't feasible. It wasn't what the factions had planned on doing either.

The plan was to set up a one-direction teleportation circle, something Miranda learned was a lot easier than anything that could go two-way. This was how Neil and his party had been able to teleport sometimes thousands of kilometers despite being in E-grade back when she first met them.

With the assistance of gods, a massive circle with meaningful investment, and C-grades behind the actual construction, sending a group of slaves across a significant portion of a universe wasn't impossible. Feasible, even. Of course, a lot was given up when doing this, and one of the reasons why practically no one had gifted C-grades was because it would be incredibly difficult to teleport them so far. Another reason was, of course, that there simply weren't that many C-grades yet. Much less C-grade slaves. Those there were could only possibly come from war criminals who had been enslaved after evolving.

After leaving the hall, she had met up with an A-grade from the Order working for the Verdant Witches and had been handed a compiled list of the total number of slaves gifted. She had quickly taken a seat when she saw the number.

One hundred and twenty million people total. More than five million of them were D-grade, with the rest of them E and even F-grade. There were also two hundred and eleven C-grades, though. The races of these slaves were a total mix. Humans, elves, scalekin, dwarves, beastfolk... as long as they were enlightened, they had been gifted.

"Alright, bring me to the organizers," Miranda ordered the A-grade.

While her identity as Jake's manager hadn't been revealed before to the wider crowd, she had no intentions of keeping it a secret. She would reveal it all to those responsible for handing over these slaves and other resources and deal with them directly. Her reason was obvious:

Records.

The reason Miranda had not evolved yet wasn't that she couldn't. She had completed all her quests already and felt comfortable with her current skills. No, she had delayed her evolution to wait until after this ceremony.

Because, with all this bullcrap she had to deal with, it had better result in some good evolution options.

Chapter 648 - A Private And Totally Not Contentious Meeting

Jake appeared together with Villy inside a new, far smaller hall. A few seconds later, Vesperia also popped into existence.

"I greet the Malefic One and my sire," she bowed towards the snake god after she oriented herself.

"Hey again," Jake said with a smile. "Say, what have you been doing during this gift exchange?"

"I simply went back to the waiting room," Vesperia answered. "My presence would have caused undue issues if I had been there, and I would personally want to avoid it. This choice did allow me to converse with Sandy, and I must say, they are quite interesting."

"Yeah, Sandy is a character," Jake agreed wholeheartedly.

“Ahem, not to interrupt, but we got gods waiting,” Villy cut in.

“Oh, right,” Jake said. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to make them wait longer than necessary.

The hall had a long table, and Jake promptly took a seat towards one end, with Vesperia sitting next to him. The Viper took the seat at the end as he allowed those waiting to enter.

Presences descended one after another. In total, nine figures appeared, split into groups with three gods in each. One group consisted of three beastfolk and had two women and one man among them. The man was big and brawny, and Jake guessed he was descended from some kind of bear, while one of the women had cat-like features. The final one had feathers covering parts of her body and looked a bit like a harpy, if barely.

The automata looked a lot more alike, with none of them having discernable genders. Their designs were all slightly varied, but they mostly looked the same on the outside. All had silvery metal exteriors, and the only big differences were their heads.

Finally, there were the representatives of the Endless Empire. Jake instantly felt it as he looked at them. All three are True Royals.

Needless to say, all three of them were also women, and they all looked remarkably similar to Vesperia. True, there were natural differences, but they were all tall and looked mostly human, except for some small insect-like features. One of them had a third compound eye on her forehead and wings on her back, another just had two feelers, and a third looked significantly more muscular and wore what looked like natural chitin armor.

The three groups barely teleported in as the lines were formed just from where they appeared. The Endless Empire on one side, the Automata Legion on the other, with the United Tribes clearly neutral and in the middle.

"I welcome the three of you to our little private chat. I hope I don't need to say that any hostilities will not be treated kindly," the Viper said as he looked at the nine of them.

Jake knew just from feeling what little leaked of their auras that none of them were at the level of the Viper. He did find it interesting that all nine subtly leaked their auras, almost competing with each other, and from what Jake could see, the two strongest ones were the True Royal with the compound eye and the bird lady.

"I, too, hope all that transpires today will be peaceful," the bird lady said, speaking for her group. "And excuse me for the late introduction, Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I am known as the Blazeheaven Phoenix Goddess."

"A fire phoenix that attained godhood, and a quite strong one at that. One of the elders of the United Tribes with power surpassing that of a Godqueen," Villy quickly briefed him.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Jake nodded, looking her in the eye.

She smiled in response and raised an eyebrow. "I had heard of your resistance to the presence of gods... and if I didn't know better, I would have taken you for one in disguise."

"I do have my talents," Jake answered with a shrug.

"That you do," she nodded, giving space for the other groups to talk. Especially one group seemed at the edge of their seats. The Endless Empire had been patient and, upon seeing their chance, jumped in.

"We of the Endless Empire also greet the Chosen," the three-eyed True Royal said before turning to Vesperia. "And we greet our long-lost little sister."

"Thank you," Vesperia said with a genuine smile. "It is good to finally make contact with you all. I have heard the call of home during this wait."

The True Royal smiled even more. "That is good."

Yet she still seemed a bit hesitant for some reason, and Jake was happy that Villy came in with the quick assist.

"She is cautious because of you, or more accurately, what you may have done with her during this past month since her birth. They can all feel she has some level of attachment to you, and the cause of this is unknown. It would not be a stretch to say that they did not just come here to convince Vesperia to join them but to convince you to let her go. Their guess would likely be that she is currently under some kind of contract forced upon her shortly after birth. Be it a slave contract or one less intense. As for why they would think this, well, we already told them that creating her and others like her isn't easily done, so what kind of moron would do that and just let the creation go without any precautions? Oh, right, you would. Should probably make them aware of how much of a moron you are before a too big misunderstanding is formed."

Jake hadn't even considered that angle. Maybe it was because putting her under any kind of contract hadn't occurred to him. Logically, he could see why others could think he would have done that, and it was probably a good idea to dispel any upcoming issues before-

"No need to worry, my sire has not placed any restriction on me or forced me into any agreements," Vesperia said before Jake even had a chance to say it.

He saw the three True Royals look visibly relieved while a faint shift in the auras of the three automata made it evident they did not approve.

"Vesperia, what are your plans following this?" the center True Royal asked before regarding Jake and Villy. "And what are the intentions of the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

"I believe I already made my stance clear. I am making no decisions here, simply backing up those made by my Chosen," the Viper said in a relaxed tone.

"And what does the Chosen intend?"

"Nothing," Jake shrugged. "I didn't do any of this with any ulterior motives in mind, and as the Viper also said during the opening speech, I didn't even intend on creating a True Royal in the first place. Not to say her appearance didn't thoroughly exceed any expectations I could have had, and I am proud of her. This is also the exact reason I have no interest in limiting her Path."

"Truly?" the goddess from the Endless Empire asked skeptically.

"Truly," Jake nodded.

"I believe you also asked me of my intentions, and as my sire said, then I am fully capable of making my own decisions," Vesperia cut in once more. "I wish to return to the Endless Empire and reclaim that which is mine. I want to return home."

"Malefic One, are you truly just going to sit back and allow this to happen?" one of the three automata finally made themselves known, speaking in a clear male voice. "Will you simply watch a valuable asset leave your purview without any objections or compensation?"

The True Royal frowned. "Stay out of this cursed metal. Even if compensation was being asked, we of the Endless Empire would gladly match any offer your kind could ever present."

"Oh? Who do you think the Order would rather deal with? A group of insects that would swarm and consume this entire planet the first chance they get, or a fellow Primordial's faction?" the automata shut back.

"How about neither, as I am not the one you are here to talk with," the Viper cut in again in a stern voice. "Tell me, how many times will I have to explain this before you get it? I am not making any decisions here. Jake is."

The ectognas and automata both seemed to frown, and Jake honestly got it. Their skepticism was rather obvious. Most would believe that when the Viper said Jake made all decisions, what he actually meant was that the Viper would still make all the decisions, but Jake would be responsible and get any blowback and benefits of whatever happened. Even if Jake wanted to make his own decisions, and the Viper allowed it, what Chosen would not, at the very least, consult their Patron? Consulting, in this case,

often just resulting in doing exactly what your Patron told you to do while claiming it was your own decision.

These gods probably just wanted to cut through the red tape... not knowing that this wasn't some political game. Jake and Villy were just genuinely weird.

"The Malefic One speaks the truth," Vesperia once more added. "While I cannot claim to fully comprehend the nature of their relationship, the decisions of the Chosen are his own, unaffected by the Vipers in most cases."

Scrutinizing eyes landed on Jake as he shrugged. "One of the benefits of my Bloodline allowing me to resist presences is my ability to also resist the pressure usually exerted by a Patron. I value the Viper's input, but I make my own choices."

"There you have it," the Viper said once more. "Part of why I like him."

"Very well," the automata nodded, finally looking at Jake. "You claim to have created this True Royal on accident. Are you now aware of the danger she represents?"

"Danger?" the three-eyed True Royal scoffed. "Oh please, we of the Endless Empire have no negative inclinations towards the Order nor the Chosen himself."

"I do know the significance her presence has to the multiverse and the wider implications, yes. I didn't know before I made her, but I do know now," Jake cut in, not wanting to listen to two gods bicker. "Not that it changes anything."

He looked at the automata in charge and leaned forward. "Let me make one thing clear. Vesperia makes her own choices, and unless Vesperia decides she wants to be exterminated by the Automata Legion, that isn't going to happen. So if you hoped to come here and buy her death, you might as well leave now. Even if it was something I wanted and was able to decide for her, the answer would still be no."

Villy nodded at his side, giving Jake the extra confidence to directly confront the god.

The automata clearly did not like what he was hearing. "Your answer indicates you do not truly comprehend the impact. While the Vespernat True Royal is a problem in itself, it is not the core issue. Your ability to create a True Royal in the first place is. What is to happen if you decide to repeat your feat and create another? Create five more? Ten? All of them? Are we of the Automata Legion to simply sit back as the Order of the Malefic Viper, and you, as their Chosen, strengthen the Endless Empire?"

"I never said that either," Jake shook his head. "That would only be a problem if I made more True Royals, wouldn't it?"

"Are you not capable of that?" the True Royal leader asked with a deep frown and a tone filled with worry.

"I never said that," Jake clarified, seeing relief among both the United Tribes and the Endless Empire. "What I am saying is that I can't just affect the evolutions of creatures like this whenever I want. I will not disclose my limit or if I even have one, but there are restrictions."

"If I may ask," the bird lady from the United Tribes reentered the conversation. "I noticed the Sylphian Hawk, and am I right to assume you had a hand in her evolution too?"

Jake nodded, seeing no need to hide it.

“The Sylphian Hawk is at the very least part elemental, so... does that mean your abilities are not limited to flesh and blood lifeforms?”

Suddenly the Automata Legion looked a lot more interested.

“I can’t see why it would be, though with my current use of it, I cannot make any guarantees,” Jake shook his head.

“If I may give my insight?” Villy asked Jake.

Seeing no harm and trusting the Viper, Jake nodded. “Go ahead.”

“What Jake does is related to the Truesoul and Origin, which is also why you see no innate karmic link between him and the three creatures he helped evolve. He does not forcefully do anything... he simply leads something down a Path,” the Viper explained.

The automata leader looked in thought for a while as he summoned a small silver sphere.

“Could you examine this?” he asked as he threw it to Jake.

Jake caught it and studied the silver sphere.

[Automata Centurion Core (C-grade)] – The core of a C-grade Automata Centurion. [Redacted].

He was surprised at seeing the description redacted, but even if he couldn’t see any details on the item, he could feel enough.

“Does it have Records?” Jake just asked as he threw it back.

“Naturally,” the automata answered as the core disappeared mid-air.

“Then the answer is yes.”

“Are you saying you can affect all Records?” the True Royal leader asked before any of the others had a chance.

“I won’t say all Records... but I see no reason why there would be any creature with a Truesoul and a Path I wouldn’t be able to affect. Well, outside of the known enlightened races, of course,” Jake said in a joking tone.

Yeah, revealing he could potentially do that, too, wasn't gonna end well. Technically also wasn't a lie either, as he only knew he could affect himself, and his own enlightened race wasn't known.

"Well, there you have it," Villy said with a smile. "Now, no more questions about the ability itself, alright? Just know it has limited usage, only Jake here can do it, and the scope of what it can truly do is as of yet unknown. Ah, and of course, if any of you deem it necessary to kill him as you find the ability too dangerous... I would take that as a personal slight."

After a brief pause, they all nodded as the True Royal added on. "To clarify, the Endless Empire would also demand an explanation."

"The United Tribes, too," the bird lady said.

The automata leader said nothing but just nodded in acknowledgment. He seemed to be quite deep in consideration before he spoke.

"We of the Automata Legion would like to, at the very least, request a potential agreement to limit the creation of any more True Royals. We would also gladly offer assistance in exploring ways for a potential partnership to form," he said instead.

"Pathetic," the True Royal scoffed. "We of the Endless Empire would like to discuss a potential repopulation effort towards the unjustly slain True Royals of the past to once more bring the ectognamorph races to balance."

“Rather than make such contentious uses of your ability, we of the United Tribes would love to discuss the possibility of allowing some of our long-lost ancestral races to once more see the light of day,” the bird lady also chimed in.

All three of them looked at Jake expectedly, but he could only shake his head. “Right now, I can make no commitments. I am unable to repeat a similar feat for now, and I want to focus entirely on my trip into Nevermore. But I will reveal that I have no plans on creating any more True Royals for now, but I would rather explore the full extent of this ability before I do anything deliberately. Anything that comes out of it will be purely accidental.”

That was the best Jake could come up with to not promise any of them anything. Not directly saying he would create more True Royals, but not cutting off the possibility he would make more also helped appease both the Automata Legion and the Endless Empire.

“Hm, very well,” the automata leader said. “We shall take our leave for now, temporarily satisfied with the response, though we do find it regretful to see the True Royal being allowed to remain alive to spread more needless destruction in the multiverse. To thank the Chosen and hopefully establish a positive rapport, I would be honored to offer a parting gift.”

The leader went forward and handed Jake something that looked like a small metal figurine of a futuristic-looking spaceship, the entire thing no bigger than what could fit in the palm of his hand.

“Thank you?” Jake said, looking at the figurine. With his Perception, he could see it was damn well made and filled with details. It looked straight out of a sci-fi movie and had a long slick body. As for what he would use it for...

“Here is the controller, remember to bind it,” the automata god then handed him a small box.

Jake took it and realized what he was dealing with after infusing a bit of energy. It wasn't a miniature... it was just shrunk down.

He had just been given a damn spaceship.

Arnold is gonna love this.

"I will be sure to put it to good use, I thank you and the Automata Legion," Jake answered.

The automata nodded and looked at Jake one more time. "The ship includes the ability to communicate directly with the Automata Legion and has no tracking features, nor will it attempt to track you even when using the communicator. Once more, I wish the Chosen and the Malefic One a good day. May your trip to Nevermore be bountiful."

With that, the three automata gods teleported out, leaving just the United Tribes and Endless Empire.

And from what Jake could see... they had been doing a bit of their own talking as Vesperia was staring at the three-eyed True Royal, and his intuition told him they were having a secret talk through telepathy.

I hope they aren't talking smack about me...

Chapter 649 - Leaving The Nest

While Jake and the Automata Legion had their discussion, Vesperia got the chance to have a talk with her fellow True Royal.

"I hope I am not overstepping by wanting a more private conversation," the True Royal Hive Queen reached out to her.

Vesperia naturally took no offense to a sister of hers taking such liberty, and she found it only proper to show respect towards one of superior power and position to herself. They may both be True Royals, but the one before her was a leader of the Endless Empire. She felt that instantly.

"I greet the Odonstrom Hive Queen, and I am honored you came here personally," Vesperia answered.

"Please, just call me Odonestra," the other True Royal answered. "And excuse me if I am a bit too emotional. Vesperia is a name I had not heard in many eras. I still remember the first Vespernat Hive Queen, and it feels like we lost her just a few years ago. You look just like her."

"I, too, remember you all, though not very vividly. The inherited memories are all very blurry, which is part of the reason I wish to return to the Endless Empire. I have much to learn," Vesperia answered, sending some positive emotions through the link.

"That is good," Odonestra said. "I must ask... I noticed that you also seem to have some innate resistance to auras? If not near-immunity?"

True Royals had inborn resistance to auras, the same as any other high-level talent. However, True Royals were still a bit different. All True Royals had immunity towards the presences of other ectognas,

including other True Royals, but they were still hit like any other creature in the multiverse by the auras of other races. So for Vesperia to remain unaffected while in the room was indeed out of the ordinary.

“A trait I inherited from the Records given to me by my sire,” Vesperia clarified to the True Royal.

“You keep referring to him as your sire. If you could, would you give me some insight as to the exact nature of your relationship with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper? Could you clarify your emotions towards the human?” Odonestra asked.

Vesperia wouldn’t say she was taken aback by the question, but she still had to collect her thoughts to properly formulate a satisfying answer.

Her emotions were hard to adequately put into words. What exactly was Jake to her? She called him Sire, yes, but she didn’t truly view him as a father. Neither did she view him with the reverence many races created by gods had towards their maker. No, it was odd to explain. All she knew was that he was family.

Sandy, the Chosen of the Lord Protector and the Boundless Hydra, had given Vesperia some great insight. Sandy hadn’t been made but led towards their current Path by Jake and had a similar feeling to herself, albeit not as powerful. They both viewed Jake as someone important to them, despite there not truly being anything making it as such. Usually, a connection through Records would be there when one was a creator and the other their creation. Similar to the one between a father and their children. Such a bond was just not there. Nothing stopped them from simply cutting him off and walking away. No karmic repercussions or negative impacts on their Paths would occur.

Oddly enough, this knowledge was not a comfort to Vesperia. No, it was a genuine fear. Because this lack of connection went both ways. While she could simply leave at any moment and never look back, so could Jake. From the looks of it, he would only lose some invested Records during her creation, but the

mere act of creating a True Royal had likely resulted in a net positive already. So... would he one day decide he didn't care about her anymore? Despite it not being something she should feel, Vesperia felt hollow just from the thought. Despite being a True Royal who would soon be surrounded by more family than nearly any other creature in the multiverse, the thought made her feel alone.

This is where Sandy had given Vesperia insight. Perhaps from having spent longer time with Jake than Vesperia herself, or maybe just because the Cosmic Genesis Worm was a better judge of character, but they seemed to have a great understanding of their shared Sire – though that was not a term Sandy used.

"Jake is Jake, same as Sandy is Sandy. Trying to say Jake needs to be like a worm just wouldn't make sense, right? So why do you want Jake to be like another True Royal or whatever it is? Why do you need to have some special thing to call him when you already got Jake? Isn't that why people got names? Jake is Jake to you, and you are Vesperia to Jake. Same as I am Sandy to both of you. Nothing is ever gonna change that. He will always be Jake, and you will always be Vesperia, so stop worrying."

The words of the Lord Protector's Chosen appeared simple but were profound in their own right. Perhaps Vesperia had been too stuck on labels all along. She didn't need a comparison when she already knew what he was to her.

"He is Jake, my sire, and my family," Vesperia simply answered with a smile. "And that will always be so."

"I want to clarify... where do your loyalties lie? With the Order and the Chosen, or the Endless Empire?" Odonestra asked, her tone slightly worried.

"While I do not think those mutually exclusive, my loyalties lie with the hive, now and forever. All I am saying is that Jake is part of my hive, and that shall never change either," Vesperia tried to clarify. "But if

a war was to occur between him and the Endless Empire... I cannot answer what I would do. Just know it is not the Order or the Malefic One I hold a sentiment towards, but only my sire."

"Hm, very well," Odonestra said, though Vesperia was not entirely confident she was satisfied with the answer. "Thank you for the insight. I look forward to showing you how our home has grown, sister."

"So do I," Vesperia wholeheartedly agreed as they directed the conversation in a more casual direction and refocused some of their attention on the room that now at least didn't have those accursed automata in it.

Jake felt the eyes of the three-eyed dragonfly Hive Queen land on him quite a few times during what Jake suspected was a telepathic talk. Seeing as Vesperia also threw him some glances, he was certain they were talking about him. Rather than desperately attempting to figure out what they were saying, he turned his attention to the United Tribes.

"I must admit, I was surprised when I heard the United Tribes also wanted to be part of this private meeting," Jake said. Okay, he wasn't really surprised as he didn't know much about the faction, but he just wanted to at least talk about something. Inspecting the spaceship more closely was also an option, but that would probably be considered rude. Also, the room was too small to make the thing big.

"While I will admit this ability of yours isn't as meaningful to the United Tribes as it is for the Endless Empire, we would still find ourselves amiss if we did not at least try to establish contact and learn more," the phoenix goddess smiled. "Now, seeing as the Automate Legion already handed their gift and left, let us not be rude and also give ours."

She looked at one of the other gods with her as he nodded and took out a lockbox.

"Giving the Chosen a gift is a difficult prospect, especially as we were made aware you are not interested in the acquisition of slaves or expansion of your territory, so I hope our rather unconventional approach will be acceptable. Rather than merely gifting you something, we wish to instead give a gift to your companion for Nevermore, the Sylphian Hawk. Something we hope can prove useful to her," the bird lady said with a smile.

Jake was not at all against that idea. "I am sure she will appreciate that, and so do I."

The phoenix goddess nodded, and the male bear man handed him the lockbox.

"I would advise you against opening the box before the beast that wishes to consume it is ready," the woman said. "What is within is one of my feathers, crafted specifically for your companion."

"What does it do?" Jake asked curiously.

"She will slowly be able to absorb it, and it will give her beneficial Records. And... should she find herself slain before the feather is fully absorbed, it shall expend the rest of its energy to give her a second chance," the goddess said with a smile.

"Very phoenix-like," Jake nodded, getting a few weird stares from the two other gods with her, as Jake realized he was perhaps a bit too casual. He collected himself and stored the box away. "I thank the United Tribes."

“There is also one other matter. Feeling inspired by the initiative of the Golden Road Emporium, would you be willing to allow individuals from the United Tribes to enter your land? Not as slaves, but as a semi-independent force that will naturally operate under all the rules of your world,” the phoenix goddess said. “These will be talents of the ninety-third universe and will be able to assist you and any potential beast allies you may have while at the same time allowing you to contact us through them.”

“I am a bit surprised the United Tribes didn’t already have at least a few people on my planet already,” Jake said, surprised.

“We focus on planets occupied by beastfolk, and while the Tribes do have many pure beasts such as I among their ranks, we try to avoid Blessing beasts on planets occupied by enlightened races,” the woman explained.

“Hm, fair,” Jake nodded. Then again, he didn’t remember encountering that many blessed beasts. There were the Hive Queens and the Sky Whale, but the Sky Whale was because of Karroch, and the ectogna wasn’t really a beast.

“Well, I can’t say I would be opposed to it,” Jake shrugged. Villy also didn’t seem to think it a problem either, so he saw no good reason to reject it. Besides, if he could get people who knew more about making nice stuff for beasts, Sylphie would be happy, and he could maybe even help Hawkie and Mystie out. Sandy, he wasn’t worried about... worst-case, that damn glutton would just eat the moon or something.

“Great,” the phoenix goddess said. “Who shall we contact to organize these matters?”

“Just contact the Order, and they should promptly connect you to her,” Jake said, only feeling a little bad about giving Miranda even more work.

The phoenix goddess nodded once more. "With that, I do not believe we have anything more to discuss. I would ask you to consider bringing one of the young candidates we brought along with you to Nevermore, but seeing your current party members, I do not believe that feasible."

The god stood up, and all three bowed towards Jake and the Viper. "We thank the Malefic One and you, Lord Thayne, for humoring us and allowing us to join the discussion. May fortune be in your future, to both of you."

With those words, the United Tribes also left, leaving Jake to question why she had said any of their members joining his party wasn't feasible.

What were those three up to back in the big meeting hall?

Oh well, he would find out once he got back to check things out. The only ones who remained left in the meeting were Vesperia, Jake, Villy, and the three from the Endless Empire, so it shouldn't be that long.

"The Endless Empire also does not have much more to discuss, and I have already had a personal talk with Vesperia about our plans moving forward," the dragonfly Hive Queen said as she regarded Jake. "I also want to finally properly introduce myself to you, Lord Thayne. I am known as Odonestra and have the rank of Grand Hive Queen within the Endless Empire, which is the same title Vesperia here will soon hold."

You go, Vesperia! Jake cheered her on internally. Cool titles were always cool, even if he wasn't one hundred percent on what it meant.

“However, the unique bond between you and Vesperia does make the entire situation a bit awkward, and while there is no true precedence, I would like to extend you the title of honorary member of the Endless Empire. A title that will hold no responsibilities, but if you wish to ever visit, will grant you the same status as a True Royal,” Odonestra offered.

Jake did a quick check-in with Villy and got a mental thumbs-up, making him agree.

“I see no reason to reject that,” Jake said, admittedly not entirely comprehending what that meant either.

“That pleases us to hear,” the three-eyed True Royal smiled. “As for a true material gift, I must admit we have been struggling on this front. The Endless Empire primarily cultivates unique treasures for ectognamorphs, and anything we can truly offer you is something the Order could do better if they so desired. Am I also correct to assume you have no interest in a private bodyguard? We are more than willing to dedicate a Godqueen to your personal protection for the rest of your life.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Jake quickly rejected. That sounded horrible. What if this bodyguard thought Jake was about to die while in a fight and jumped in to save him? That would totally be cheating and ruin the spirit of battle. There was a reason he didn’t even want Villy to resurrect him if he died. As for if any high-level individual or even god wanted to assassinate him... well, he had a Primordial with a constant livesteam going.

“You also are not keen on slaves... do you also consider drones slaves? If a Hive Queen settled in or around your planet, we would be able to provide constant support and a near-endless supply of workers.”

“I already had my fair share of issues with Hive Queens on my home planet. Oh, on that note, I am not sure if I should apologize or not, but I killed a mid-tier C-grade Isoptera Hive Queen who was blessed by

the Fourth Desert Queen, and that act triggered some response to try and brand me a heretic?" Jake asked, remembering the incident.

"Truly? I must apologize, and I shall bring it up with her for sure. Would you like these ectognas off your planet?" she asked rather casually.

"They will be taken care of eventually, and I don't need you to take any actions," Jake waved her off. He had a strong feeling that if he said yes, then in the very next moment, she would inform him that every single ectogna blessed by the Fourth Desert Queen in the new universe was dead. That would be a waste of a good grinding spot.

"Very well. Rather than try and think up something we have to offer, are there any things you desire? We will do whatever we can to fulfill your wish," Odonestra offered.

Jake thought for a second before he looked at the Hive Queen still sitting next to him.

"Promise to take good care of Vesperia and get me something so we can stay in touch," Jake said with a smile.

Odonestra did a double-take. "We... already planned on securing a way to establish contact, and naturally, Vesperia will want for nothing."

"Then we are good," Jake nodded. He truly didn't know what he could want of them. Sure, he could always get more alchemy stuff, but he didn't need it.

“Are you sure?” Odonestra did a triple-take.

“Yes,” Jake said in no uncertain terms.

Vesperia beside him tried to look stoic, but he still saw her smile a bit.

“... Very well,” the True Royal goddess finally nodded. Waving her hand, she took out what looked like a small golden plate and telekinetically floated it toward Jake. “This is a token specifically crafted for you, and I would hope for you to Soulbind it as soon as possible for safety reasons. A paired token will be given to Vesperia, and you two will be able to communicate through it. The token is also what signifies your status to the Endless Empire, and you can show it to any ectognamorph, even in your own universe, and they should show you respect if they are from a Lineage part of the Empire.”

Jake caught the token and nodded. “Thanks. Will it work in Nevermore?”

“Sadly, no, the dungeon is cut off,” the Hive Queen shook her head.

“Alright,” Jake said.

A few seconds passed before Odonestra spoke again. “I believe it is time for us to take our leave and return home.”

She looked at Vesperia, and she nodded as she stood up. Jake also stood up, with only the Viper remaining seated.

“Nice having you visit,” the Viper smiled at the three True Royals.

“We thank the Malefic One for allowing us to,” Odonestra nodded at him. She then looked at Vesperia again.

Jake still stood next to Vesperia, and she looked to hesitate a bit with joining her fellow True Royals. She turned and looked at Jake, making him smile.

“Oh, come here,” he said as Vesperia unprompted lowered herself so Jake could hug her. The far larger woman returned the hug and lowered herself even further. Jake failed to hide a grin as he patted her head, making Vesperia close her eyes as her antennae seemed to vibrate.

“You take care, okay?” Jake said.

“Okay,” Vesperia said.

They stayed like that a bit longer until it got too awkward, and he slowly let her go. They exchanged a glance as Vesperia walked over to her fellow True Royals, who looked at her and Jake a bit oddly.

"I thank you once more, Sire, and I will repay the favor you have shown me one day," Vesperia said as she turned and gave him a deep bow.

"You have nothing to thank me for," Jake shook his head. "But if you truly want to repay the favor... just be happy and do well. Oh, and call me once in a while because I will probably forget."

Vesperia nodded, and no more words were exchanged as the four True Royals disappeared and began their journey back to the Endless Empire.

Villy, still sitting in his chair, let out a deep sigh. "They fly from the nest so young, don't they?"

"She teleported," Jake said with a deadpan expression.

The Viper sighed even deeper. "They teleport from the nest so young, don't they?"

#### Chapter 650 - An Old Man's Assessment

He had known from the very beginning he would be the primary target of anyone interested in joining Jake's party. The reason for this was manifold. Firstly, he was the only other human in the group and an earthling like Jake, which unintuitively made him stand out. Miyamoto also had what most would perceive as the most replaceable role in the group, as he was simply a swordsman. The Fallen King was a Unique Lifeform, and the Sylphian Hawk was clearly closely tied to the Chosen and had unknown powers, while he himself was just a man.

Seeing as no one would dare challenge a Unique Lifeform, and Sylphie wasn't an appealing target either, they naturally scrutinized him. The only thing Miyamoto had was his status of being a Transcendent, and while that perhaps spoke to his talents, it wasn't necessarily tied to combat power. A Transcendent skill

was not one that could simply be used repeatedly to settle any and all conflicts, either, so it didn't make him that much more threatening due to its unreliability.

Which once more reduced him to just a swordsman.

To make matters more complicated, he was also given the task of communicating with those who wanted to join not as a replacement but as the fifth party member. Sylphie could not – or simply didn't want to – communicate using actual words, and the Fallen King was thoroughly disinterested in who would join outside of directly rejecting some individuals.

Alas, it was a responsibility he had to take on with Jake absent.

Shortly after Jake had disappeared, several individuals approached their group of three. The first ones to arrive all had cocky looks on their faces and radiated confidence. Miyamoto felt glad to see the talented young man and eight women all so full of vigor to prove themselves.

Sadly for them, he was also responsible for teaching them where they were lacking.

"Greetings, I am Ulgransir from the United Tribes," a beastfolk woman was the first to introduce herself.

"Hello there, I am-"

Seven of the nine were polite, which made him think better of them. All were there not to join as the fifth member but were aiming for his spot, so he would, unfortunately, have to fight. He had anticipated this, and sizing them all up, he made a decision.

“It is a pleasure to meet all of you,” Miyamoto bowed towards them, and he saw one of the A-grades from the Order was already nearby. “Rather than delay the inevitable, we should get it over with. What say you all?”

“I like your thinking,” the one man said as he turned to the attendant. “Would you be willing to teleport us there?”

As he had been briefed on already by the Hall Master named Viridia, an arena of sorts was prepared as they all knew this would happen. One that would also show their battle for all to see.

The attendant looked at them all for confirmation, and after getting nods all around, the Sword Saint was teleported away together with the nine challengers. Sylphie and the Fallen King also chose to join him, but both went to the stands, with the hawk having decided the crown of thorns on top of the Fallen King’s head was an acceptable nest. The Unique Lifeform did not protest.

Miyamoto appeared standing in a sandy colosseum-like arena, and he couldn’t help but smile internally. He had never battled in a proper arena before, especially not with such a large audience. Everything was broadcasted into the main hall, and the Sword Saint hoped a display of strength would help scare off any annoyances. As the seconds passed, more and more C-grades teleported onto the stands, and Miyamoto had a feeling most were there to challenge him.

Lastly, the attendant from the Order teleported in.

“A lot of interest in joining our Chosen for his conquest of Nevermore, with such little room in the group. While there are no official rules regarding this, the human named the Sword Saint has agreed to take on challengers. Mind you that even if you win, it does not ensure any actual membership of his party. However, this is a chance to prove yourselves,” the attendant-turned-announcer said as he looked down at the nine. “Now, who of you wish to go-”

“Excuse me,” the Sword Saint interrupted with an amicable smile. “To not needlessly delay, would it be acceptable for all nine of them to just come at me together?”

The attendant frowned, and Miyamoto saw many unsatisfied expressions from the stands, with the nine people in front of him looking furious.

“Are you certain?” the attendant asked. “I will try to prevent deaths, but there are no guarantees.”

“I am certain,” the Sword Saint nodded stoically.

“Very well,” the attendant simply nodded and backed off.

The nine in front of him didn’t move. The woman who initially approached him looked angry as she stepped forward.

“We are here for individual duels, not to gang up on you. Do not disrespect us,” she said in a severe tone.

"I did not mean to disrespect you," the Sword Saint shook his head. "But I shall honor your request for a one-on-one duel if you so desire."

The beastfolk woman sneered as the eight others backed away and were all teleported onto the stands. She crouched over a bit as her bestial features were amplified, and two fang-like daggers appeared in her hands. Energy revolved as she disappeared from where she had been standing, kicking up a cloud of dust.

A speedy one.

Miyamoto moved his hand to the handle of his sword and drew.

The woman appeared behind him, and he spun around. The Sword Saint had wanted to end it in one strike but found himself pleasantly surprised when she managed to raise her arm and block it with her bracers. She was still sent tumbling but rapidly stabilized and engaged once more.

They exchanged several blows as the Sword Saint chose to focus on defense. The woman was incredibly fast, and her striking power was acceptable.

Reminds me a bit of Jake... but...

He decided to attack. Rather than simply block, he deflected one of her daggers and swept his sword up toward her neck. Just before his blade hit, the beastfolk woman suddenly sped up significantly, and

Miyamoto felt the concept of time. A defensive skill of some kind, also similar to the one Jake had used. Albeit not truly comparable.

The Sword Saint's sword vibrated, and the beast woman lost the speed she had just gained. In the next moment, she was teleported away, and the announcer spoke.

"Winner: the Sword Saint."

His opponent now stood on the other side of the arena with wide eyes and a small slit on the side of her neck with blood running down and soaking her fur.

"You have incredible speed, and your offensive capabilities are impressive. However, you rely too much on your natural talent and overpowering your opponent through sheer aggression," the Sword Saint smiled and gave advice. "Moreover, the mental attacks you use continuously can be worked on. It seems you are trying to mix concepts too much, and an opponent with a steady mind will not find themselves faltering. Finally, you are used to fighting beasts, are you not? Your style is designed for it, and rather than mimic bestial tenacity, consider looking into more formal combat training. These are just my thoughts, and it is your choice if you wish to take them to heart."

One could argue it was condescending of him to take up a teaching role towards a young talent of a large faction, but the Sword Saint had a hard time holding himself back. The woman was clearly talented and had the foundation, and if she had formal training, she could have put up a good fight.

The beast woman looked lost for a few seconds as she felt the wound on her neck. After considering for a few seconds, she nodded. "I shall take your words into account."

Satisfied with her response, Miyamoto turned his head to those waiting in the stands. "Next, please."

A mage entered the arena.

Seven seconds later, she left again to have her hands reattached.

Next was a scalekin warrior in full plate armor and a shield.

This was the longest fight so far by quite a bit, but after a bit over two minutes, he, too, was taken away after a relentless barrage of stabs embedded him in a wall. Miyamoto had to also use the concept of rain during that bout, making it clear he was the most interesting so far.

After that, he finally got a group of five to enter together. Within the next nine minutes, they were teleported away one after another, ending with the Sword Saint once more standing alone within the grand arena, the only signs of battle on his form the slightly frayed ends of his robe.

Miyamoto did have to admit... putting him in the arena perhaps wasn't the fairest. He was not a monster hunter or specialized in dungeons. He had struggled against massive opponents in many instances, and he was not as experienced in fighting monsters as most others.

He instead specialized in fighting other humanoids. Be it scalekin or human, they had the same movement patterns, the same basic strategies, and the same fundamentals. To him, these young geniuses were ultimately not skilled enough to pose a challenge. If powerful beasts had also wanted to participate in this event, perhaps things would have been different, but alas, only the enlightened races had shown up wanting to join.

The Sword Saint looked at the stands and put his hand on his sheathed sword as he regarded them. “Who next will join this old man in exchanging some pointers?”

The attendant in charge of these duels teleported away yet another unfortunate soul who believed they had found an opening or perhaps simply hoped the human had gotten tired from the many previous fights. Barely any fights lasted a minute, and as an A-grade, the attendant could easily see why.

It wasn't stats or powerful skills the human won with. He was clearly top-tier in both of these categories, but they were secondary. Especially in duels like this, where no one truly went all-out, and the use of powerful skills was discouraged, he reigned supreme. Even when the opponent used strong skills, they ultimately couldn't touch the swordsman.

Despite only being C-grade, the man touched on high-level concepts far above one his grade should be capable of. His movements were immaculate, practiced, and disciplined. What was even odder was the feeling the attendant got when he looked at him.

An air of ancientness always hung around him, matching his appearance. By all accounts, he was a young talent, having reached C-grade in less than a century and a half, making many of the “youngsters” he dueled older than him.

Peculiar, the attendant thought.

But not unexpected. For the Chosen of the Malefic Viper to have deemed him worthy of entering Nevermore with him only made this level of monstrous talent and power expected.

I don't know if I should be disappointed or happy, Jake thought as he also took a look at the livestream of the "young ones" dueling in the colosseum. On the one hand, it was nice to see the old man was indeed an absolute monster and could whop all these young geniuses with relative ease, but on the other hand, why did they all suck so much? Well, he did kind of know the reason.

These were not actually the best of the best. They were just the good ones from all these factions. The best of the best would go with parties formed only from internal members, and while many of them were close to top-tier, it was ultimately too big of a risk to send them with Jake.

While Nevermore did not have the highest death rate, it was still significant. For a few people to die and for party members to be replaced during a dive wasn't out of the question, and as the odd one out in Jake's party, the chances of them dying would be the highest. It was also only expected for Jake to treat his friends and associates better.

Still, he found it disappointing. A few support types even entered the arena for the old man to test them, and while a few of them looked decent, Jake didn't see anyone he thought impressive. Then again, his view of healers was significantly skewed by the one healer he had ever fought with being a borderline immortal Bloodline Patriarch with an arcane affinity and healing skills off the charts.

On the topic of Eron, Jake had, of course, wanted him to join if they could reach some agreement, but he simply had no way to track down the guy or even know what he was up to. It was even possible he had already gone to Nevermore, and if the guy had done it under an alias and wanted to hide his identity, they had no way to find out. Considering the god hiding Eron could hide him even from Villy was proof it wasn't some weak god. Didn't mean they had to be Primordial-tier, just good at hiding people.

Villy did say someone impressive would show up later, Jake remembered the god had promised. With the private meeting taking place, Jake wasn't sure if there would even still be that after-after party and,

if it was a thing, that he would participate. Villy had briefly mentioned before Jake went back to the large hall that it was possible they would just do a private meeting with this special guest.

This idea was further strengthened by Villy not returning to the hall but going to meet privately with some other deities.

Jake's return to the hall was soon noticed, and he found himself approached by several inquisitive individuals, but luckily he had Viridia to act as shield and advisor, so he avoided saying anything dumb or looking too ignorant. His identity as an individual from the new universe and his fast progress also worked as a good excuse for why Jake didn't know many common sense things, and if all else failed, he could always fall back on the good old "I am a Chosen, why should I care about such minor matters?" farce.

Time passed by, and soon enough, the Sword Saint and the others returned. After a quick talk with the old man, they at least had a few potential support types who could potentially join, but it wasn't looking good. Jake wasn't enthusiastic about any of them, and the King clearly wasn't either, as he found them all subpar. Sylphie only liked one of them, but that was because she had long, frizzled hair, which the hawk argued would make an acceptable nest in case of emergencies.

As he was discussing if they wanted one of the people judged by the Sword Saint, Viridia spoke to him.

"A special guest will arrive shortly," Viridia informed Jake privately in a severe tone. "I was unaware one such as him would appear, so I did not warn you properly beforehand, so please be careful."

"Alright," Jake said, wondering if another Primordial had appeared. That would be something. "Who is it?"

“Nature’s Attendant.”

Jake slowly nodded to himself.

Yeah, I have no idea who that is...