

Hunter 881

Chapter 881: Mysterious Boots & Dragon Princesses

Jake had been so damn distracted by everything else going on that he hadn't even noticed Eversmile before he was right there. Sure, he had seen the figure approach, but his aura had been entirely hidden, and with so many other notable presences filling the hall, he had managed to blend in long enough to surprise Jake.

Yeah, this type of setting really wasn't for Jake, throwing him off this game that much. And now this...

To say Jake was taken aback by the question would be an understatement. Especially when one considered who it came from. Eversmile wasn't some insignificant figure, and Jake's mind began to work at high speeds as he tried to give a non-committal answer. One that could hopefully give him at least some information to go off.

"Why are you asking?"

"Karma," Eversmile simply answered. "Now answer me."

Jake really wanted to tell the guy – or girl, at this point, Jake had no idea what the fuck Eversmile was – to just fuck off, but felt like that wouldn't be a good idea. Eversmile was just too eccentric and unpredictable. Plus, the true answer shouldn't be that suspicious.

"From the Challenge Dungeon made by the Viper," Jake answered honestly.

"Hm? That could explain some of it, I presume," Eversmile said, seemingly deep in thought. "But not all of it. If these boots are indeed connected to Vilastromoz, then it appears I will need to have a conversation with him."

By now, Jake was getting really curious himself also as he took a chance. "Why the curiosity? Is it that odd to see boots given to a Chosen with powerful connections to their Patron?"

"You are fully aware there is something with those boots far more complicated than merely a connection to your Patron," the Primordial didn't even try to entertain what Jake said. "However, seeing

as you have been cooperative and the fact the Malefic Viper would likely gladly share the details of our future conversation with you, I shall give you an explanation.”

Jake felt the sound of fingers snapping... as the entire world around him seemed to twist and turn. He felt like the ground beneath him fell away, as everything was replaced with an empty space that made Jake feel as if he was deep under water.

The only two things that remained were Eversmile and Jake himself. Then, the strings appeared. Multi-colored threads spread out from Jake and Eversmile, countless of them, but soon they nearly all faded. However, a few strings still existed, and Jake saw them all connected to the boots on his feet. One of these threads led to Eversmile himself, while all the others simply disappeared into the vast emptiness of the space he was in.

”As you can see, there appears to be a powerful karmic connection between these boots and myself,” Eversmile said, motioning toward the thread connecting them. ”Despite that being the case, I cannot see any reason for why this would be... much less the cause of all these other threads.”

Jake, floating in the odd space, took a moment to really get his bearings. Things were seriously freaky, especially as he also felt the conference room all around him through his sphere, making it certain he hadn’t actually been transported anywhere. In the real world, he was just standing and staring into empty space while his mind and potential soul were taken somewhere entirely different. What made everything even worse was the distortion between these two things, as time seemed slowed in the real world while at the same time overly fast within this special state.

”What are these other karmic threads?” Jake asked, confused.

”This is the second conundrum,” the god pointed out as he reached out and touched one of the threads. ”I do not know. They are obscured... no, they make no sense in the first place. As if they are misplaced within both space and time, leading to something that once was or never came to be. Some of the threads I do recognize, though.”

Eversmile began walking through the odd space as he tapped a karmic thread. ”This one leads to the Malefic Viper. Unsurprising, based on what you said.”

Jake slowly nodded. Yeah, that made sense.

Tapping a second thread, Eversmile spoke again. "And this... this is Valdemar."

That... was weird?

A third thread was tabbed. "Blightfather."

Okay, definitely weird.

And a fourth. "Holy Mother."

Eversmile spoke as he just continued while walking a circle around Jake, tapping thread after thread.

"Wyrmgod."

"Starseizing Titan."

"Rigoria."

"Yggdrasil."

"Stormild."

"Aeon."

Before he reached the last thread.

"Daofather. All twelve Primordials connected to a single pair of boots through karmic threads. And to not misunderstand. These are not weak connections. They are firm, old, and seemingly without any good reason to exist, as I cannot read their history or origin."

By now, Jake was more than a little confused as he tried to search his brain for an explanation as he blurted out a potential cause.

"These boots did once belong to the Viper himself, like, he used them while he was a mortal..." Jake said without thinking much.

"Another potential reason, perhaps," Eversmile said as he thought deeply. "The connection to the Malefic Viper does appear more unique in nature than the others, so perhaps... no..."

Jake felt sidelined as he also realized that this entire thing hadn't been done by Eversmile simply out of the kindness of his heart or to help Jake. He had done it to try and make Jake spill more information, something that had definitely worked. Perhaps it was also done to spark Jake's curiosity and to see if he truly didn't know.

However, even with all that, Jake wasn't going to say anything about the First Sage. That part he was not going to volunteer. Not just because that was private history between the Viper and his first master, but because Jake wasn't sure what to do with the implications of it all if the First Sage was somehow the cause. Hopefully, he would get some answers when they would get their fateful meeting... Jake just needed a lot more profession levels first to make that happen.

"Alas, information is lacking, and the best course of action would be to simply question Vilastromoz," Eversmile said after a bit.

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"What's the current working theory?" Jake ended up asking, not really expecting an answer.

"That, as you said, the boots once belonged to the Malefic Viper, and they were infused with further Records in the process of becoming an item in one of the Challenge Dungeons created so many eras ago, leading to some sort of mutation caused directly by the system simply because of how much time passed before they were claimed. Some form of mutation that linked the boots to the Records associated with being a Primordial, thus also naturally forming a karmic connection with all who carry those same Records," Eversmile explained, surprising Jake a bit with his straightforwardness.

"However, this is highly improbable, just the best theory till more is known," the Primordial finished off as he threw Jake a final glance. "You have been of some assistance. Take this experience as a reward for your help. Oh, and I say this genuinely: congratulations on beating Yip of Yore on the All-Time Leaderboards. It's both an achievement worth recognition and something that has certainly turned this entire situation with him and the Malefic Viper far more... interesting."

With those words, the world around Jake collapsed again, as everything returned to normal in an instant. Jake found himself back in the hall entirely, standing alone with a glass in his hand, no sign of Eversmile anywhere.

"Ree?" Sylphie chirped, confused, as Jake looked around on instinct.

"It was-" Jake began as he stopped himself. "Eh, the woman that was just there. The one I talked with."

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, even more confused.

Jake just looked at the hawk with confusion before shaking his head. "Never mind, I blame the alcohol. See, this is why you shouldn't drink."

"Ree!" Sylphie definitely agreed, having already learned about the horribleness of alcohol.

Smiling, Jake hid his thoughts as he considered what Sylphie had said. According to her, Jake had just been greeted by some woman who said congratulations before walking off into the crowd, with Sylphie seemingly finding the encounter so forgetful she couldn't even remember how the woman looked.

This was really odd, considering they had both just seen Eversmile's transformed form, and as C-grades, they both had near-perfect memories... yet when Jake also tried to recall the transformed Eversmile, he just saw the "true" form of Eversmile instead.

... I really don't want that dude as a straight-up enemy. That would be fucking terrifying, Jake thought. A shapeshifter with such skills could cause so much chaos without anyone even realizing it...

As Jake was deep in thought, he barely noticed when two people approached him.

Only when they were nearly upon him did he snap out of it and notice it was the princess from the Regalflight and the Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord. Quite a few people noticed the two approaching Jake as if several expected something interesting to potentially happen. The Demon Prince even threw Jake a smile from across the hall as he raised a glass.

Soon enough, the two arrived, and Jake turned to meet them. The princess was at the front, and Jake felt her aura easily from this close. He could definitely see how she had gotten such a high placement on the Leaderboards. She was powerful, and she had also gained a lot of levels, as one had to remember she wasn't a dragonkin, but a full-on dragon. Well, soon she would be... as a C-grade, she was still not fully mature yet, very much the same as Sylphie. Though if one looked at her humanoid form, Jake definitely wouldn't describe her as immature.

"Greetings, Chosen of the Malefic One. I congratulate you on your exemplary performance within Nevermore and can only begin to imagine the wonders you will show us in the future," the princess from the Regalflight said while doing a curtsy. Jake didn't even know people in the multiverse really did curtsies...

The Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord simply smiled and nodded, not saying anything. Jake didn't take offense, though, as he responded with a nod of his own. "Pleasure to meet you both, and let's not pretend like the two of you didn't also do pretty darn well."

"Your words bring me honor," the princess said with a smile. "Allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Aishalstromoz Regalflight, daughter of the Dragon of Gold and Princess of the First Golden Palace. However, you are more than welcome to simply refer to me as Aisha, as my friends call me."

Lots of stuff in that one... and hey, Jake knew who this Dragon of Gold was. Aurustromoz, the current leader of the Regalflight - the most powerful of all the dragonflights but also the fewest in number. Oh, and the eighth-place finisher on the All-Time Leaderboards, above even Ell'Hakan. To learn she was his daughter meant her father was an extremely powerful god, and from the looks of it, she was living up to her Lineage. As for all that stuff about the First Golden Palace and all that... yeah, Jake had no idea, but it sounded impressive.

Moreover, Jake also kind of understood the implications of her requesting for him to call her something only friends usually do. Not that he particularly cared, as he wasn't going to refer to her with some long title or her long name if he had an alternative.

"And you can also just call me Jake, Aisha," Jake said politely... his answer apparently coming as a surprise for some bloody reason as the not-yet-fully-mature dragon blushed and turned her head slightly away...

"Al... alright, I shall... Jake..." Aisha said, stammering as she quickly worked to regain her composure and the volume at which she spoke his name would make even mice ask her to speak the hell up. The Disciple from the Dao Sect just smiled, seemingly finding the situation amusing as she still didn't say anything, which... not gonna lie, Jake found kind of weird. Something Aisha likely noticed and jumped onto as it was a great change of topic.

"Please do not be offended. As the disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord, I am sure you can understand why she isn't able to converse normally," the dragon princess explained... which didn't explain jack shit to Jake.

Luckily, Jake got an assist from Silverstorm, who had been observing their exchange and seemingly had an idea Jake didn't know. "The Heartsoul Daolord is a master of Willpower and making their will a reality. As the disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord, every word of hers is infused with the power to alter the world around her, making even a casual word effectively an attack. In fact, any way she communicates her intent toward the world will have such an effect."

Jake listened intently... and he was pretty sure he remembered seeing something similar in a video game before the system, which instantly made Jake assume this Heartsoul Daolord was some old bearded man living on an icy mountain.

Anyway, Jake nodded in understanding as he looked at the Disciple. "No worries, I wouldn't want you to speak and push me back with unrelenting force by accident."

The Disciple of the Daolord smiled and nodded, still not really communicating much. Actually, why wasn't she just using telepathy? The Fallen King couldn't speak, but he could still release his voice through soul magic stuff all around him, and as the Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord, she should be able to do something similar. Soul was literally in the name.

Then again, Jake clearly had fuck-all idea how her Path worked, so he probably shouldn't ask a question that would just make him appear ignorant. He already felt uncomfortable enough as things were with all the attention on him, and embarrassing himself definitely wouldn't make things any better.

"Thank you for your understanding," Aisha bowed her head slightly. "Now... I will confess, I did not merely approach you to offer you my congratulations but for more personal reasons."

Jake realized there was indeed something up, as he nevertheless didn't say anything and inquired further. "What could the princess of the Regalflight possibly need of me?"

She seemed a bit nervous as she spoke.

"I know you have had some interactions with both the Emberflight and the Azureflight, some of which haven't been the most positive... and I just want to ensure that there is no lingering resentment or negative sentiment toward you and the Dragonflights," she spoke, her volume a bit lower than usual.

"No worries. Truly," Jake said, trying to sound reassuring. "I'm not that petty as to be offended by something small. Besides, the guy from the Azureflight seemed to have learned his lesson directly from the Viper as far as I remember."

"That he did," Aisha nodded, looking solemn. "It was an... unfortunate encounter. One we take full responsibility for."

"Again, don't worry," Jake waved her off. "I'm not going to hate an entire race or faction just because one of their members sucks. So relax. We just met, and thus far, you made a positive first impression, so let's just say that balanced out all the prior negative encounters, and we're back to neutral."

He really didn't want a bunch of dragon tribes to think Jake bore a grudge. He liked dragons. Dragons were cool, simple as that.

"I... that would be great," Aisha smiled as Jake continued.

"Great, then from here, let's create some positive encounters," he said, with the intent to be polite and create positive relations with the Dragonflights.

"That is... if the Chosen wants, then..." the dragonkin princess suddenly blushed while hiding her face as the Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord shook her head and elbowed the dragon in the side as if telling her to get her head out of the gutter.

Turning toward Jake, the Disciple of the Daolord smiled and bowed as she finally spoke. "Let us meet again."

Jake felt something odd shift in the air as the Disciple dragged away the dragon who looked like she was about to overheat with how red she was. Jake sighed internally as they left. That went well, I guess?

Chapter 882: Heartfelt Conversations & Hidden Agendas

"You're a real smooth-talker, huh?" Jake heard from behind as Carmen walked up to stand beside him. "Sure trying to get that little dragon princess wrapped around your finger."

"Hm?" Jake said, not entirely sure what she was getting at. "No, I was trying to be polite. She just seemed a bit sheltered and nervous."

"Damn, you're dense at times," Carmen sighed. "Think about it. That little princess has definitely been praised and raised up her entire life, with every single male influence in her life, either a family member, someone trying to get in her pants, or people too fucking scared to try anything as they know the kind of trouble they could get into for offending her. Then you come along, confident and unbothered by her status, treating her like an equal and being all nice, while she also knows her dad would probably be over the moon if she dragged you home with a ring on her finger."

Jake stared at Carmen for a while as she spoke before shaking his head. "I think you're reading way too much into this."

"She definitely isn't," Jake suddenly got backstabbed as his brother decided to join her. "Let me put in terms you can probably understand better. Imagine if it was you, before the system, as a young man. One day, you are asked to deliver something to some attractive millionaire model, who then proceeds to have a nice conversation with you, treating you incredibly friendly. All the while, Mom and Dad are hiding behind a bush ten meters away, giving you thumbs-ups, telling you to go get her."

"I... don't think that analogy works," Jake muttered.

"Kind of does," Carmen agreed. "Not really, but kind of, I guess. Anyway, the point is most women who view you as a potential partner will see you being nice as a green flag and potentially even the most mundane flirting in the world. Coupled with them being sheltered with no idea how to act around the opposite sex, you get situations like this."

Jake looked at her and Caleb, who nodded in the background as Jake sighed. "So, what's the solution?"

"Fuck if I know," Carmen shrugged and smirked. "Not my problem either. Just trying to be helpful here so you are at least aware of what you're doing and don't get taken by surprise when you suddenly get a surprise proposal. In all honesty, I find your cluelessness and all the blushing fair maidens quite amusing."

"Ditto," Caleb seconded. "Also, it would be hilarious if you dragged a dragon home to Mom and Dad. Even more hilarious if you dragged a whole bunch of women home from all sorts of different races..."

"Are you hinting at wanting me to introduce someone to you? Damn, I'll have to tell Maja what you're up to while exploring the multiverse..." Jake said, looking at this brother with a faux disappointed look.

"Alright, alright," Caleb raised his hands in surrender. "You just keep doing you. Anyway, I actually came to say that I'll have to do some politics of my own, so see you around. Oh yeah, and I feel like I say this every time, but do come by Skyggen for a visit sometime, yeah?"

"Okay," Jake nodded. Yeah, he really should visit, especially after spending such a long time in Nevermore.

Caleb walked off, and Jake saw Maria had also bailed somewhere. The others were busy on their own as Carmen stayed standing beside Jake.

"Don't you have to do some Valhal stuff?" Jake questioned her.

"I am doing Valhal stuff right now by standing next to you and chatting in full view of a bunch of major factions, including that orange fuck across the room," Carmen responded.

"Ah," Jake said as he smirked. "So you only bother to hang around me because it's work?"

"Not gonna lie, I am getting a bit annoyed at both you and Valhal at this point. One day, they're telling me to get closer to you; the next, they're telling me to stay as far away as I can, and now we're apparently back to them wanting to make it look like Valhal has a good relationship with you," Carmen said, shaking her head. "Fucking politics."

"Amen," Jake agreed wholeheartedly as he decided to quickly put up a barrier of stable arcane mana to keep their conversation private. "But if it's worth anything, I have a feeling they're not going to flip-flop more after I met Valdemar."

"Nah, definitely not," Carmen shrugged, and with the barrier up, she seemed a bit more open to sharing information. "Seems pretty keen on making you join Valhal at this point, and from what I heard, Ell'Hakan and Yip of Yore are fully aware of that, potentially even on board. I have no fucking idea what they're planning, but it definitely includes separating you from the Malefic Viper, one way or another."

Jake was a bit surprised as he looked at Carmen. "You seem awfully informed. Do they keep you up-to-date on things?"

"Apparently so. Gudrun agrees with wanting a closer relationship between Valhal and you, and she seems to think the best way of doing that is through me," Carmen explained casually. "Pretty sure they want me to be a honeypot or something like that. Haven't directly asked me yet, but damn, have they hinted at it."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that," Jake said, scratching the back of his head.

"Now you're the one overthinking," Carmen grinned as she punched Jake in the shoulder. "Ain't no fucking way I'm going to be anyone's honeypot."

Jake felt a bit relieved as he nodded in response.

"Not that you can't have some honey once in a while," Carmen said flirtatiously. "Just don't get your dick stuck in the pot."

Chuckling, Jake shook his head. "Not gonna say no when offered."

"You know, I just realized how damn good I am at my job," Carmen said as she stared out of the transparent stable barrier of arcane mana. "Look at how damn well I showed off the multiverse the great relationship between us to the level of making that little dragon lady of yours jealous."

Jake had indeed spotted a certain dragon in human form throw glances their way as the Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord tried to take her attention away from Jake and Carmen talking.

"Oh well, I guess I should stop breaking the hearts of every young lady present," Carmen said jokingly after a bit as she threw Jake a deep look. "Hm, maybe it's the mask? Nah, definitely the dangerous and mysterious aura."

"Very funny," Jake said as he waved her off and dispelled the arcane barrier.

"Hey, it has its appeal," Carmen shrugged as she walked off. "See you around, Jake."

"Enjoy politicking," Jake said as the Runemaiden gave him a middle finger before she decided to finally get back to some people from Valhal.

Returning to the others from the Earth group, Jake enjoyed talking a bit with Eron and Arnold. Alright, mainly Arnold, as Eron preferred to listen, not really adding much, and only ever really chiming in when he asked some questions about certain concepts. The three of them ended up mainly discussing the House of the Architect as time passed slowly, with the conversation being quite enlightening.

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By now, most of the people who really wanted to talk to Jake had. More did come by simply to congratulate him but without wanting anything in particular. People from the Altmar Empire, United Tribes, and a few other factions, big and small, either invited or restated their offer for him to visit, and they were all very polite about it.

From these interactions, it did become clear that besides the titles Chosen of the Malefic Viper and Harbinger of Primeval Origins, Jake apparently now had a third title that made others both wary of him, and interested in forging good relations. In other words, his prestige was building, and it was building at a far higher speed compared to his so-called rival.

Something this rival clearly knew... as it appeared Viridia's prediction had been slightly off. She had predicted that Ell'Hakan would keep a good distance from Jake throughout the get-together, avoiding any interactions with him. However, Jake soon saw him approach, not even walking with any of his cronies or people from other factions. He made his way over all alone, and as the person with the second-most interest placed on him in the whole event, his movements caught quite some attention. As the entire get-together was also winding down at this point, far less interesting things were happening, making the Chosen's actions stand out even more.

Jake calmed himself down as he saw Ell'Hakan approach from behind. He quickly considered what the hell the other Chosen was planning, as he also realized the implications of Ell'Hakan approaching Jake.

For him to seek out Jake was almost seen as a sign of submission – a sign he viewed Jake as someone with a higher status, making it only proper conduct for Ell'Hakan to be the one approaching Jake. What's more, for him to do so alone indicated he came as an individual and not someone representing any faction or gathering of factions.

When Ell'Hakan got within ten or so meters, Jake turned to meet him. Acting arrogant or haughty would gain Jake nothing. He had treated every other person who approached him so far politely, even those he didn't really know or wasn't a fan of, and treating Ell'Hakan differently or even antagonistically would only play into his story that they were fated rivals or something dumb like that.

Jake especially wanted to avoid looking like some arrogant young master. Arrogant young masters never won.

One could almost sense the tension in the room as Ell'Hakan did something Jake had not expected. He cupped his hands and slightly bowed toward Jake with a smile. "Greetings, Lord Thayne. I wish to congratulate you on being the new champion of the All-Time Leaderboards. It's truly an achievement worth recognition."

It took a lot from Jake to not just blurt out and ask what the hell the guy wanted, but he kept his cool. He couldn't let emotions control any of his actions, especially not in front of Ell'Hakan, who could read

everything. Jake really didn't like to be put in this situation, but he would have to manage as he evaluated the situation.

Ell'Hakan had clearly taken a more respectful stance. His choice of calling Jake "Lord Thayne" was definitely also deliberate. It communicated a closer relationship than merely using a title and remained polite in nature while also conveniently leaving out mentioning any relations to Jake's Patron. Just from this alone, and his earlier talk with Carmen, Jake had a guess what Ell'Hakan's goal was.

"Thank you," Jake said calmly, continuing as he responded in kind, though he failed to not at least take a small dig at the other man. "I should also congratulate you on your placement as Era's Pinnacle. To hold such a title for even a moment is impressive."

Ell'Hakan smiled at Jake's response, as by now, quite a lot of attention had gathered on them. The conflict between Yip of Yore and the Malefic Viper was an undercurrent of the multiverse all factions with influence of any kind knew about. It was a situation they closely monitored, and a social clash between their two Chosen had to be of significance.

"I did my best, and I guess I couldn't have done more than that. Still, I take pride in what I did accomplish, even if my performance ultimately only allowed me to enter the top 10 of the All-Time Leaderboards," the other Chosen said with a sigh.

"All anyone can do is their best," Jake simply agreed non-committedly, trying to give Ell'Hakan as little ammunition to work with as possible while remaining polite and neutral.

"Isn't that the truth," Ell'Hakan said with a melancholic smile as he spoke in a slightly louder tone than before. "It's what we all strive to do. To do our best in any situation, with the power, resources, knowledge, and state of mind we have at that moment in time. Yet sometimes, even our best does not prove enough, as was proven on the Leaderboards this day. This... brings me to the past, where I also made decisions and did things that I at the time believed were my best course of action, but now, in retrospect, only brings me regret."

Jake had tried to not give Ell'Hakan ammunition... yet it seemed like he had done just that as the other Chosen continued.

"My failure was to be found in the knowledge I had, forming the reason behind my actions. Assumptions, created from nothing but my own biases and through sin by association... something I now realize was a mistake, and the second reason I approached you here today, Lord Thayne," Ell'Hakan said, very deliberately wanting all the eyes on him he could get as he bowed.

"With my deepest sincerity, I apologize for past transgressions. I acted foolishly and committed sins I can only hope to be forgiven and strive to make up for," Ell'Hakan continued before speaking to the room as much as to Jake. "I invaded your planet, killed people close to you, and created chaos, believing I was doing the right thing. Believing I was freeing your world from a tyrant who wished to use the planet in the fashion we have seen the Order of the Malefic Viper use so many others. I was wrong and had jumped to conclusions, and now I realize you never acted on orders of your Patron. I realize you are not the second coming of the Malefic Viper... you are Lord Thayne, your own person, through and through."

There were few times in Jake's life when he had been more glad he wore a mask than now because his face did not look good. He had no idea what to say, as by all accounts, Ell'Hakan's words sounded honest. Moreover, Jake did not detect the slightest use of any Bloodline shenanigans – assuming Jake would even be able to detect it.

The only place it was maybe used was Ell'Hakan using it on himself, making his own words sound more emotional and sincere. Because damn, did he sound genuine in his apology. Thing is... Jake knew he was playing at something, and Jake desperately tried to figure out what that was so he could get out ahead of it before it was too late.

"In fact, I came to learn that despite your identity, Jake Thayne is far more than just the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Harbinger of Primeval Origins and now the one holding the top spot of the All-Time Leaderboards are but two of your titles. Look at those you associate with, too. Your fellow natives, friends, blessed by more than half of all the Primordials."

Ell'Hakan continued his speech, as he no longer had his head bowed, but looked up with a smile on his face.

"You are truly a one-of-a-kind existence. A Bloodline Patriarch, wielding more potential than possibly anyone the multiverse has ever seen, and for the longest time, I didn't realize that you weren't this special because you were the Chosen of the Malefic Viper... you would be you, regardless of which god had realized your excellence first."

His words were clearly praise, but they made Jake feel slimy, as he now had a really good idea of what he was trying to do.

"I say all this with the hope of making it clear... I never bore any animosity toward Lord Thayne. Only the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. The one friend I killed was also a follower of the Viper, making me believe he, too, was a fanatic who would only cause the multiverse harm. Now I see he may have been innocent... and that knowledge truly gnaws at me," Ell'Hakan said with a sad look on his face.

"Alas, I hope we can look toward the future. I hope you will give me the opportunity to make up for the sins of my past and repay you, Jake Thayne, for the transgressions I have caused. I swear now that I will truly do my best to try and set things right."

Jake simply stared at the other Chosen for a bit, and just as he was about to open his mouth, Ell'Hakan bowed one more time.

"Please, take the time to consider my words... I do not need an answer here today. I merely wished to express my emotions and regret, as I hope to one day be forgiven. Regardless of your decision, know that I no longer hold any animosity toward you. Even if you can't forgive me, I, at the very least, hope that the next time we meet, it will not be as enemies. I truly do not want to fight you if it can be avoided."

Ell'Hakan did not leave more time to say anything as he spoke loudly to the crowd and Jake alike. "Thank you for listening to my words so patiently today, Lord Thayne. May next we meet be an encounter we both look back upon and call fortunate."

With those words, Ell'Hakan bowed and left swiftly as he teleported away... leaving Jake with a final telepathic message.

"Do not think my words a mere ruse or deceit. I truly have nothing against the man known as Jake Thayne, only he who identifies as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper... and I have a feeling you perhaps are more of the prior than the latter. You do not need the Malefic Viper, but he desperately needs you to rebuild himself. I already know how thin your loyalty is and how little faith you have in your heart. This is not a sin, but merely recognizing your own worth. So, I implore you to rethink your position. Rethink if staying with a god such as the Malefic Viper is truly in your best interest in the long run. Valhal, a reputable and respected faction, is also interested in having you join them, and if you choose to throw off the chains that is the failing Malefic Viper, I truly believe the War God himself would take you as his

Chosen. I will not tell you what to do; just remind you of the many alternatives you have. You will thrive anywhere; you need no one. Can find a home anywhere. So why stay on a sinking ship?"

Chapter 883: Temporary Farewells

Jake wasn't sure if he should have said or done anything before Ell'Hakan left. It felt as if he had given the other Chosen the floor and allowed him to say and do whatever he wanted... but that didn't necessarily mean what Ell'Hakan had done was in his best interest.

As the saying goes, never interrupt an enemy when he is making a mistake.

Ell'Hakan was clearly under the impression the relationship between Jake and Villy was on thin ice. That Jake was not satisfied with him as a Patron. That, or at least he believed Jake didn't hold any loyalty toward Villy... which he was kind of right about.

Jake didn't hold the kind of loyalty one would expect of a Chosen toward a Patron. He held no faith, and he wouldn't just do whatever the Viper told him to do. Ell'Hakan and Yip of Yore had already figured this out from the looks of it, making their current strategy make a lot more sense.

Eversmile is likely involved in some way, too, Jake also mentally noted, as he considered the situation more deeply.

From this entire thing, coupled with what Carmen said, Jake reached a conclusion... they had officially adopted a narrative that did not require them to kill Jake. This was likely a direction they had moved toward for a while, but only now did they state it outwardly and speak it into reality. The fact this had been done in front of a crowd that would quickly spread it to every major faction in the multiverse also wasn't a coincidence.

They wanted to show that they held no animosity toward Jake, just the Malefic Viper. The way they framed it also wasn't entirely idiotic. Jake doubted it would be long before it was also common knowledge that Valhal was interested in recruiting Jake, potentially even offering him a similar position. All of this was to give Jake an escape.

Ultimately, this meant Jake staying with the Malefic Viper was framed as a choice. That Jake chose to stand on the side of an evil tyrant, despite having been given ample opportunity not to, giving them an excuse if they did somehow kill him. Perhaps they also bet on Jake's sense of self-preservation and

wanted to clarify that should he choose to bail the proverbial sinking ship, there would always be a lifeboat waiting.

Jake would guess the two spin doctors didn't really want to do this but felt forced into it. There was definitely pressure from many factions who would oppose Jake's death before they could make use of him. With his new achievement as the top performer of the All-Time Leaderboards, he had only grown further in fame and gained the interest of even more major factions.

This entire situation is messy... but not really that complicated, Jake thought. And it truly wasn't.

Yip of Yore wanted to kill the Malefic Viper to become a Primordial Slayer. This was the crux of it.

El'Hakan was helping Yip of Yore to do this, initially by trying to kill Jake.

Even if that had now changed, the core of what El'Hakan wanted to accomplish remained: to have the Malefic Viper lose his Chosen. Just rather than losing his Chosen by Jake dying, he would lose him by Jake choosing to jump ship, which would definitely also negatively affect the Viper... because if not even his Chosen believed he could win and stood behind him, did he really stand a chance?

Of course, El'Hakan and Yip had made one major mistake. El'Hakan had been right about one thing, though: one can truly only do their best, but the best one could do was limited by knowledge... and those two clearly had no idea Jake was a Heretic-Chosen, nor could they comprehend the concept behind a god and a mortal genuinely just being friends.

The large hall had become silent with El'Hakan's speech, and it took quite a few seconds before anyone made a sound after the Chosen left. All the focus was on Jake, and from the looks he got, many of them seemed to believe something positive had just happened to Jake. Which, in some ways, it had. El'Hakan had admitted to what he had done, and even if he had apologized... well, Jake wasn't obligated to forgive.

Not that he was going to say anything to anyone. The less he gave away, the better.

As Jake stood there, the Fallen King sent over a telepathic message.

"An apt strategy adopted by the Chosen of Yip. He has created a situation where he is no longer the aggressor, and many believe it would only make sense for you to forget and forgive whatever he, in their minds, minor mistakes he's made. Everything ended up nicely being blamed on the Malefic Viper, and I wouldn't be surprised if the next time you have a public meeting, he will offer you some kind of compensation to make his actions also match his words."

"Honest, he can do whatever the fuck he wants. He killed Chris, that's unforgivable," Jake shot back.

"Yes... but in the eyes of others, he just killed a fanatic serving the Malefic One. An insignificant D-grade. Lives are not equal, and someone like you or Ell'Hakan could kill millions without anyone truly caring. In their eyes, your value exceeds countless weaklings," the Unique Lifeform continued.

Jake wasn't going to argue as he knew the Fallen King was right. Shit, some would maybe even argue Jake had done more to Ell'Hakan than Ell'Hakan had ever done to Jake, simply by beating him on the Leaderboards and hurting his pride while killing several of his comrades during the "misunderstanding" that was his invasion.

The mood in the conference hall had shifted quite a lot after Ell'Hakan had done his thing, and his departure seemed to have marked the end for many others, too. Jake saw Wintermaul leave, only throwing a single glance toward Sylphie while departing, with Jake throwing one in return, making the ice elemental hurry out. The Holy Church didn't stick around much longer either, and Jake saw Carmen leave with a group from Valhal soon after. The same was true for Casper and Caleb, who went with their respective factions.

Before even arriving at this meeting, Jake had already been informed that they would be offered passage back to their home planets or wherever else they wanted to go. All was facilitated by the Wyrmgod. In retrospect, this was probably a necessary service to not leave a bunch of mortals stranded on a floating disc in the middle of the emptiness of space.

Soon, as the hall was thinning out, the Sword Saint returned to their group, bringing along a certain dryad. Dina looked like she had some mixed emotions, and Jake understood why. Everyone but Sylphie and the Fallen King from Earth also tactfully left, leaving their Nevermore party as the only ones left.

"The gang is all back together," Jake smiled as Dina rejoined them.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched happily, making Dina smile, even if she couldn't quite hide her sadness.

They had spent the vast majority of the last fifty years together, a huge part of their lives. When it came to pure life experience, likely the majority for all but the Sword Saint and maybe the Fallen King. In the beginning, Dina had been reserved and barely spoke to anyone but the old man. However, with time, she opened up a lot, happily discussed things, and shared her vast knowledge of the multiverse imparted to her as a high-level member of a large faction.

So Jake understood her emotions now that things were coming to an end and they would have to go their separate ways. Even if it wasn't a goodbye, no one knew when they would meet up again. Jake and company were all to return to their own universe, where she couldn't follow and likely had quite a few system events to go before their universe would open up fully.

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Additionally, it wasn't as if Dina didn't also have her own things to deal with. She was the granddaughter of Nature's Attendant and held his Bloodline, giving her many responsibilities and limitations, and especially now that she had placed top 100 on the Era Leaderboards, the expectations of her had only risen further. Making friends while in a position like hers surely wasn't easy; Jake knew that pretty damn well, being the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. He was just a lot more lucky that many of the people around him didn't really care overly much that he was a Chosen.

"I... I nearly forgot," Dina said as she looked at Jake. "Congratulations on the All-Time Leaderboards... and thank you for allowing me to accompany you during this time."

"Eh, I should also be thanking you for helping me even get the record," Jake waved her off with a smile as he joked: "Then again, we did all carry our own weight, so maybe we should all thank each other in some circlejerk of gratitude?"

"There is no need to openly display gratitude between equal partners, it's simply an implicit understanding," the Fallen King added, both ruining Jake's joke and being pretty on-point. There truly was no need for anyone to thank the others.

Dina smiled a bit. "Still... thank you."

Jake shook his head, not really bothering to argue about something this dumb. They had plenty of dumb arguments over the last half a century, and there was no reason to add another one to the list.

"Where are you headed from here?" the Sword Saint asked Dina, partly to change the subject.

"I'll be heading home with Grandpa. I was told there was a celebration back there for all those from the Pantheon who took part in Nevermore," she answered before turning to Jake. "Grandpa also said you should come visit once you find the time... but I think all of you would be welcome if you wanted to come by."

"Sounds like something worth considering," the Sword Saint nodded.

"Perhaps, but not before we have handled this Prima first," the Fallen King added.

"Not like we're in a rush," Jake shrugged as he looked at Dina. "Do tell Nature's Attendant and Artemis that I'll come by at some point after the Prima Guardian is dealt with and things calm down a bit. I doubt any visit I make will be a brief one."

"Ree!" even Sylphie agreed.

"Okay!" Dina smiled, happy they all seemed open to one day stopping by.

Their group was quiet for a while before the Sword Saint spoke once more. "I believe it's time we stop delaying needlessly."

"Yeah..." Dina said, her smile rapidly fading.

The Sword Saint shook his head as he reached over and put a hand on her head, rubbing her hair-like plants. "This is not a goodbye but a temporary farewell. It's been a pleasure spending the last few decades with you, Dina."

Jake just smiled as he saw Dina hesitate before seemingly thinking: "screw it," as she went forward and gave the old man a hug. He returned it as he kept rubbing her hair. He already knew that of everyone in their group, she had definitely become the closest with the Sword Saint. Maybe because he also had those grandfather vibes.

Soon enough, the two of them stopped hugging as she also said goodbye to the others. Sylphie got a few scratches before getting pulled into a hug, while the Fallen King and Jake both got more reserved goodbyes.

"We shall meet again, dryad," the Fallen King said, getting about as polite as he ever got.

"Yep, see you around," Jake smiled.

"Take care of yourself, alright?" the Sword Saint said as he gave her a final head pat.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, waving with one of her wings.

Dina nodded resolutely. "Farewell for now."

With that, she turned around and left, only looking back half a dozen times as the four from Earth remained behind in the conference hall that was rapidly emptying out.

"I shall head back to Earth now," the Sword Saint said after a brief pause.

"And I shall follow. Too many of the World Council have been gone for too long," the Fallen King concurred.

"Can you take Sylphie with you?" Jake asked the two of them. "I'm gonna go visit that Demon Prince first and stop by a few other places before I also head back."

"Very well," the old man nodded. Sylphie didn't complain either, as she flew over and landed on top of the Fallen King, who didn't even protest.

"In that case... see you all back home," Jake smiled as he turned to leave, heading for some of the people he had to visit before going to the Demon Prince. He wanted to finish all other business first in case something went wrong with that ritual, and he would have to flee Nevermore City. Not like that was going to happen... when did anything bad ever happen when people tried to do rituals that included ancient Devils and Demon Lords?

Within a vast library, a being was sitting with legs crossed in mid-air while holding a large tome. All was still until suddenly, a hole in space was formed, and a figure appeared.

"He is annoying, isn't he?" the floating god said with a sigh as he put down the book he had been reading. "Way too unpredictable. Then again, that isn't only hurtful to us but to his dear Patron, too. Say, what was his mental state like during your grand apology?"

"Confusion overshadowed nearly every other emotion as he seemed unsure what our goals were. At least in the beginning," Ell'Hakan answered, totally fine with not beating around the bush but getting straight onto business. "However, he seemed to realize about halfway through, at which point he suppressed his emotions for the most part. He isn't very good at it, though. He definitely isn't a fan of the change in narrative and still seems keen on getting personal revenge."

"Not anything we didn't expect," Yip of Yore nodded. "Say, what was his emotional response regarding you insinuating he should abandon his Patron?"

"Multi-faceted, but thoroughly lacking in one vital emotion... there was no anger, an emotion I would very much expect from someone being told to abandon their god," Ell'Hakan said with a smile. "He also clearly didn't disagree with any of my assessments regarding his lacking loyalty towards the Malefic Viper, nor my insinuation he is entirely his own person. One thing is certain: Jake Thayne holds no faith in his heart toward the Malefic Viper, even if he does seem to have a generally positive view of the Primordial."

Yip of Yore nodded slowly. "That is likely what keeps him with the Order."

"That, and he would hurt his Path if he left," Ell'Hakan added.

"Hm? No, not particularly," Yip of Yore said, Ell'Hakan feigning surprise.

"What do you mean it won't?"

"He just needs to become a heretic," Yip of Yore shrugged. "The system has plenty of safeguards if you choose to abandon a god. In fact, should the Malefic Viper die after he becomes a heretic, he may even become a Usurper. Hm, just imagining it is a bit exciting... to be a Usurper of a Primordial's Legacy."

"Perhaps it may even be put on the table as a potential advantage should he abandon the Malefic Viper," Ell'Hakan pointed out.

"No, let some things remain unspoken," the god shook his head. "In fact, let us not focus too much on the Chosen of the Malefic Viper for now. Allow Valhal to handle him, and let's see if they manage to recruit him, as that would be the best outcome. Killing him at this point would only lead to far too many problems, and quite frankly, I find it uncertain if you would even be capable of slaying him."

"He is powerful, yes... but-"

"No buts," Yip of Yore interrupted him. "His story is too strong right now. Too many are interested in his Path and where it will take him. As of this moment, he is the worst kind of opponent for you, as fate is on his side, so to say, making him far more difficult to deal with than otherwise. If you want to kill him for personal reasons, you need to do it under the proper conditions and framing."

"Very well," Ell'Hakan relented. "As you say, let Valhal handle recruiting him."

"In the meantime, you know what you have to do. Make your preparations for the Prima Guardian and ensure everything is in place. Even if things have gotten a bit annoying, we will continue as otherwise planned. You may believe this entire debacle was a major setback, but in truth, I do not view it as such. Instead, I see it as an opportunity," Yip of Yore said as he stood up. "The Malefic Viper's prestige is getting more and more tied to his Chosen, meaning should he lose him, the impact will be far grander. And let's be fair, if we set all the conditions right, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper will abandon him for greener pastures. You should know that better than anyone."

Ell'Hakan was taken aback. "What do you-"

"Don't think I am unaware of your backup plan with the Holy Church," Yip of Yore grinned. "I'm not angry about it or even disappointed. In fact, I'm elated that my Chosen is not some moron who would throw all his eggs in one basket."

It took him a moment before Ell'Hakan realized. "You're certain that-"

"Please, do you really think I would gamble everything on getting rid of some Chosen to weaken the Malefic Viper?" Yip of Yore said with a smile, interrupting again. "Any strategy so reliant on a single element like that is prone to failure... especially seeing as there's truly only one factor that matters in situations like these. One thing that will ultimately decide the victor."

Yip of Yore looked down at the mark left by the Malefic Viper's touch on his shoulder as he traced it with a finger, the mark disappearing wherever his finger touched before he allowed it to reappear again. "Power. And between me and that washed-up Primordial... well, I got a slight edge."

Chapter 884: Having A Cold One

Jake had a few places he wanted to stop by before heading back to Earth. He first went to a few of the factions that had congratulated him on his Leaderboard placement. He did this primarily to be polite and stuff, but this entire tour was also done for one other reason: politics. Well, and optics... but it all fell under the same umbrella of political bullshit.

Before he had gone to visit anyone else, he made his way back to the Order of the Malefic Viper and said hello to Viridia. He even met Draskil there, who seemed a bit annoyed at having failed to place in the top 250, but he was still nice enough to give Jake a congratulations for his achievement. The Malefic Dragonkin had done pretty okay in his own right, but he simply wasn't a crafter at all, making him pretty darn screwed when it came to some of the Challenge Dungeons, and while his party was alright, they had only reached floor seventy-five and not even done the event boss there.

Anyway, while meeting these two was nice, the one he had come to the Order compound to meet wasn't Viridia or Draskil, but a certain snake that he found sitting in a chair on a terrace overlooking the vastness of space spreading out beyond the ring that was Nevermore City. It was a sealed-off area, and Jake passed a barrier as he made his way there, ensuring no one could see or hear their following conversation.

As Jake approached the terrace, he had already seen the ice bucket with bottles in it, making him smile. Jake walked onto the terrace, the god sitting in the lawn-chair not even turning to look at Jake as he raised a bottle. "Take a seat and grab a cold one."

Jake didn't need to be told twice as he took a bottle, popped off the cap, and sat down. Taking a big swig, he felt the sweet beer run down his throat as he breathed out, satisfied. "Some good stuff. Where's it from? Doesn't taste like any of Valdemar's; he tends to prefer making ale, I noticed."

"It's from my personal collection and quite a good lager. Good enough for when there's cause for celebration," Villy answered as he turned and looked at Jake. "So, how does it feel to be the top performer of the All-Time Leaderboards?"

"Eh, not really any different than usual," Jake shrugged. "I just went from being the best to more people knowing I am the best. The title is nice, though."

"Titles are nice, and they certainly know now you are quite an outlier. More so than before," the Viper smiled as he kept peering out into space. "You know, I'm just gonna be honest with you... I didn't think you would actually take the top spot. I had hoped for the top ten and maybe the top spot on the Era Leaderboards, but both you and Ell'Hakan did better than anyone estimated. If you hadn't been here, he would have had all the attention on him for sure."

"A bit hurt you didn't think I'd do it," Jake grinned. "Though I will say it wasn't easy, and I did get kind of lucky with the Challenge Dungeons. I could straight-up cheese the hell out of one and did pretty damn well in nearly all the others."

"Luck is such a fickle word. You may think you got lucky, but you need the skills to create that luck for yourself. It's impossible to design any scenario where some will not have advantages, and your Bloodline can create advantages in many situations, making it incredibly hard to restrict unless you want to make the challenges themselves overly restricted," the Viper explained as he finished his first bottle and took out another from the ice bucket.

"I guess Ell'Hakan also had his advantages," Jake muttered before smiling. "Oh well, who cares? I did it, and that's all that matters."

"True, true," Villy nodded, taking another swig before looking a bit more serious. "Good job in there. You did pretty damn well."

"Glad to impress," Jake smiled, also quickly finishing off his first bottle before taking another.

"After this, you will have even more eyes on you than before. Being my Chosen and a Bloodline Patriarch with an incredibly potent Bloodline that may or may not include your abilities as a Harbinger of Primeval Origins already makes you a person of interest. Now you have added on an extreme level of talent in combat, too, not to speak of the Records attained from topping the Leaderboards," the Viper said, still looking pretty serious.

"Before, you were just a young talent they hoped to maybe make use of for your unique abilities... but now that has changed, at least somewhat. To all the divine factions, you were just a mortal who would die off in a relatively short amount of time, and all they really needed from you before this happened was for you to spread your Bloodline and maybe use your abilities related to Primeval Origins. Even if you never helped a specific faction with any of these things, they knew that the amount of help you could offer was limited by your lifespan. However, now... now you have introduced another factor they need to consider with some level of seriousness: the possibility of you becoming a god."

Jake looked confused at Villy as the snake god explained, as he tilted his head. "Becoming a god was always the plan and definitely a possibility."

Shaking his head, the Viper chuckled. "It's the plan for most young geniuses, but words, hopes, and intentions are cheap. I am sure every single individual in that little party today fully intends to become a god, but statistically, it would be impressive if even a few of you attained immortality. That's why it was never really something the factions bothered to consider, as the chances were so low. This is no longer the case. Even if your chance is still incredibly low in their eyes, it's now high enough to consider seriously."

"Why am I feeling offended by that notion..." Jake muttered.

"In their defense, they are acting on incomplete information. They are not fully aware of your Bloodline, though they do have a better idea now. At least Valdemar does, having seen your little fight in the Colosseum of Mortals," Villy explained. "But we both know what happened in that arena is far from everything, and at this point, I'm just looking forward to what more surprises you are hiding."

"Speaking of incomplete information... a certain orange bastard approached me during the get-together," Jake said as he quickly explained what had happened with Ell'Hakan inside the conference

hall. Due to the barrier made by the Wyrmgod, not even the Viper had been allowed to look inside, meaning their little encounter was a surprise to him.

After Jake was done talking, the Viper just shook his head. "I had not expected them to take such a direct approach. But yes, you are definitely right that they no longer view you as a target to kill but still one to separate from me. And in many ways, their approach is correct. You are gathering so much attention these days, and I'm getting so many benefits with you as my Chosen. In nearly all ways, that's good, but should you choose to abandon me as your Patron, Yip of Yore would be able to turn all my gains against me, turning your exceptionalism into a demerit for me."

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"Damn, too bad that's not even an option," Jake said with a smile, now already on his third beer. "Say, if I wasn't bound by my weird Path and could bail at any time, would you be concerned?"

"Concerned about you abandoning me, or concerned about the effects of you abandoning me? The distinction is important," Villy asked, clarifyingly.

"Bit of both, I guess?"

"I wouldn't really be concerned about you abandoning me, but the effects if my Chosen did abandon me would be annoying for sure," the Viper explained. "While I don't have your instincts, I get the feeling you aren't the type to jump ship just because there are rumors the boat is taking in water. You're more the type to shoot an arrow at whatever bastard tried damaging the hull."

Jake smiled, as he did still wonder: "El'Hakan and Yip of Yore are still clearly confident, though. I get the feeling those two aren't the types of people to act with this much confidence if they don't have a reason. Exactly how strong is Yip of Yore, actually? Thus far, I kind of got the impression he is a high-tier god who can jump to be close to the top-tier using his weird storytelling skills."

"Hm, I believe I told you he killed off an entire Pantheon shortly after ascending to godhood, right?" the Viper asked.

“Yeah,” Jake nodded. He did remember the Viper briefly mentioning that and the notoriety it gained him as the top god of the last era.

“Well, I didn’t include that this particular Pantheon included a Godking and a Godqueen. He slaughtered them both easily, and when others tried to hunt him down for revenge, he killed all those, too, including one surpassing the realm of Godking. He is... well, before you were around, he was known as the biggest genius to ever appear in the multiverse, and as of this moment, he is a god no one can say with confidence they would be capable of killing without him at least being able to escape. All of this is to say that even without all his tricks, he would be considered a pinnacle god, and with them, I can understand why he would have the confidence to aim for the very top. Especially so when his target is me, a Primordial who hadn’t exactly been doing much for the last many eras. In many ways, he is a counter to someone like me, as much of my reputation is based on stories of old, and that’s very much his domain,” the Viper gave a lengthy answer, seemingly fine with sharing quite a lot of information.

Jake frowned a bit at the long answer as he did have one question. “If he appeared right here, right now, would you be able to kill him?”

“That isn’t a question worth considering,” the Viper shook his head. “I wouldn’t even try.”

“Would you be able to at least fight and beat him if he tried to kill you?”

“Now, isn’t that the question of the era?” the Viper just smiled as he motioned for Jake to take another beer. “I will not answer, though. While it may sound silly to you, speaking things into existence and the concept of jinxing can begin to seem very real when you get to my level.”

Jake was silent for a moment as he sighed. “Alright, alright. Anyway, was me staying silent good or bad during Yip’s Chosen’s speech?”

“I don’t think it matters overly much,” Villy shrugged. “He would have found a way to get his message out no matter what, and in some ways, it’s good he gave you an official apology like that. It proves he was the original aggressor and the one who initiated an antagonistic relationship between you and him. That he is the one chasing you and not the other way around. It also helps further establish they are no longer interested in simply killing you. Ah, but do note that should a situation presents itself where they could kill you without the backlash, they would definitely take it.”

“Well, I would take the opportunity to kill him too if I got the chance,” Jake shrugged.

“And I’m sure he is also well aware of that and will ensure to never put himself in such a position... unless he wants to, that is. Because that is the one good excuse he can have to fight and kill you: that he was merely defending himself from the mad Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I’m sure he would spin some story as long as it has the fundamental truth that you attacked first behind it, likely even putting the blame on me entirely. Should he win, that is. If you kill him, who cares?” the Viper briefly explained.

Jake just nodded as he emptied out his current bottle and got another. “To change the topic, you said there would be more interest in me now from major factions... how exactly will that materialize? Will I get bothered more than before?”

“Surprisingly so, no. They will likely leave you alone a lot more. I’m sure you kind of even noticed it today. While the young talents of different factions may have invited you to visit or wished to form positive relations, they will do so in a calmer and more casual tone from now on, and many of them did it out of personal interest to try and forge relations to the top of their generation.”

“That’s... good?” Jake said, a bit surprised. He had fully expected to be bothered more than before. That was kind of the norm he had gotten used to. Stand out more equals more attention, equals more people coming up to bother him and trying to make him join their factions and stuff.

“I would say it is. What you mainly accomplished was to prove that they are not really in a rush to get you. Even if you don’t become a god, many of the factions now have high confidence you will at least reach A-grade, giving you a significantly increased lifespan and thus more time for them to, at the very least, borrow you for a few decades. Should you become a god, they also want to ensure they formed a good relationship with you before ascension, even if they did fail to recruit you. If you are the next Yip of Yore, that would definitely be in their best interest,” the Viper explained before sighing. “Though... Jake, I am truly sorry. I know the implications of this are disappointing.”

“What?” Jake asked, confused.

“They won’t stop, but there will be less now...”

“Yeah, not taking that bai-“

“Your beloved honeypots! Woe is you to no longer be chased by the young maidens, hoping to ensnare the illustrious Chosen Harbinger of Primeval Origins. It’s truly a disaster,” the Viper said, looking at Jake with extreme pity. “But don’t worry, I am sure some will still try and shoot their shot, even if it’s not heavily suggested by their factions.”

“You know? I think I’ll survive,” Jake said in a deadpan tone.

“Stay strong, my Chosen. Keep up that façade,” Villy gave him a pat on the back.

“Oh, would you look at the time! I have an appointment I must attend!” Jake said, smiling at the Viper. “Gotta help that Cerulean Demon do a big ritual with some Heart Fragment of the Cerulean Devil or something.”

“Hm? That sounds fun; tell me more,” the Viper suddenly seemed interested, and Jake gladly shared the details he knew.

“Yep, definitely fun, and I would go for it,” Villy nodded. “Even if you have to spend some of your unique energy, I still think it would be worth it. Not often you get a possibility like this, and making friends with demons is always nice. They are very reliable when they owe you. Oh yeah, and the levels and Records would also be nice.”

“Knew you would be on board... but what if it goes wrong? Pretty sure that Cerulean Demon will be fucked if the ritual fails, or worse, it backfires on him,” Jake voiced his concern.

“Oh, yeah, if that happens, you need a backup plan,” the Viper said, looking deep in thought for a second. “Alright, two things. First of all, have them sign a waiver. Secondly, have those movement skills ready, and should things go south, just run the fuck away and act like nothing ever happened.”

Jake stared at the god for a while. “Good idea with the waiver.”

“Yep,” the snake god grinned. “Ah, but before you head there, stop by the Valhal compound and stay there for a little bit, yeah? And don’t hide it when you go there; let all know you went to visit them. And do so after going to a few other factions. Gotta at least keep people guessing if you are considering your options.”

“More politics?” Jake sighed. “Oh well. Cya around, good talk.”

“See you,” the Viper said, as he followed up with a message sent through something Jake had quite frankly missed... their divine connection. “And good to have my very own personal livestream – with direct communication - back.”

Chapter 885: A Day Of Forced Socialization In Nevermore City

Jake walked out of the terrace and through the Order compound while making sure to swipe a dozen or so beer bottles from the somehow endless ice bucket on the way out. He had a few places to visit before it was time to head back to Earth. As Villy had talked about, he at least needed to make it look like he was actively forging and maintaining relationships with other factions, especially Valhal. That’s also why he would visit there last, as he planned on spending a few days in their compound. He needed a few days anyway, as he came to learn on his way out of the Order’s base.

Two messages had been left for him. The first of which was by someone associated with Aeon Clok, who was to deliver a present for winning the bet for the time mage on the final City Floor. Jake had honestly forgotten it, but now that he was reminded, he looked forward to seeing what the mage had that could help his time banana not-a-tree at home.

The second message was from the Cerulean Demon, saying where to find him and asking if Jake was still interested. If he was, a disc detailing the ritual and the preparation the demons had made was also included for him to look through, which was part of the reason he would need to spend a few days at Valhal’s compound. He needed to look through it and familiarize himself with the ritual, and he may as well do that there.

Okay, Jake did kind of lie about there only being two messages... there were actually a few dozen, but only two of them were actionable. The rest were just pleasantries and invitations for different things, most of which Jake planned on just entirely ignoring. And by ignoring, he meant having someone else send back a diplomatic message, a job that would likely fall to some poor administrative worker from the Order who would be all stressed out about responding for him. Oh yeah, and he also told them to respond to the Demon Prince first and say Jake was interested and would come by within the week.

With all that done, Jake ventured outside as he first went to a small shop in Nevermore City that the first letter directed him toward. It turned out to be a small job on the outskirts of Nevermore City, far enough away so that Jake had to use a teleporter to get there, as flying would simply take too long.

Before he even entered the shop, he saw it was buzzing with customers. Enough so that there was a line out the door, making Jake reconsider if maybe he should come back later, but he didn't get that chance as he got a telepathic message while he was considering his options.

"I have been expecting you, Chosen of the Malefic One. Please, come in through the back entrance," the voice said, as he felt the one speaking to him inside the building. Sadly, he couldn't see them with his sphere, as the inside was spatially expanded, distorting everything.

Doing as asked, Jake snuck his way around back and through a small door. Once inside, everything expanded as expected, and Jake saw himself standing within a pretty large workshop with a dozen hobgoblins working. None of them even looked up as they all looked deep in focus, but one hobgoblin did walk toward him from across the room.

"Welcome to our little shop, Chosen of the Malefic One. And congratulations on your performance... to think the new champion of the All-Time Leaderboards would visit my humble little shop," the hobgoblin said with a sigh as he smiled.

Jake instinctively did an Identify, and confirmed what he kind of already knew. This was another follower of Aeon Clok, and a B-grade one at that.

[Hobgoblin – lvl ??? – Greater Blessing of Aeon Clok]

The fact that all of the hobgoblins were working on watches of different kinds should definitely have been a clue.

"I got your invite and was told you had something for me," Jake said, not really super interested in sticking around longer than necessary.

"Of course, of course," the hobgoblin said, still smiling. "The young master said you helped him acquire quite the wealth, and we were even allowed to reward you from his own stash. Please, I hope this item can be of utmost assistance and suit your needs."

The hobgoblin waved his hand as more than a dozen large plastic bags about the size of a human torso appeared and fell on the ground. Jake instantly realized what he was looking at as he used Identify on the contents of the bags through the clear plastic.

[Primed Manure of the Timeless Simiiform (Legendary)] – Manure created by A powerful B-grade Timeless Simiiform variant, a monkey-like beast that infuses its manure with the concept of time to defeat its foes. This manure is infused with powerful time energy and has been primed to be easily absorbed by any plant with the time affinity by an outstanding crafter. Limited alchemical uses due to the priming.

Honestly, what had Jake expected when he asked for something to help his banana musa? Also, he found it oddly coincidental this manure came from a monkey, considering he had originally found the tree in the possession of a time magic monkey.

“Is the Chosen satisfied?” the hobgoblin asked, a bit nervous as Jake didn’t say anything.

“Hm? Oh yeah, this is good,” Jake nodded as he swooped up all the bags. “I do have a question, though. Is there some form of correlation between monkeys and time magic? This is not my first time encountering such a beast.”

“Why are you... no, not in particular, based on what I know,” the hobgoblin said, looking confused. “Maybe there is, and I’m just ignorant on the subject.”

“I see,” Jake just nodded, assuming it was just a coincidence. “Thank you for the bags; I will make sure to put them to good use.”

Jake turned around, prepared to leave the same way he came in, as the hobgoblin stopped him.

“Uhm, sir... this may be too much to ask, but would you honor us by fulfilling a simple request?” the hobgoblin asked, fidgeting a bit.

Yeah, Jake really wasn’t in the mood for more work, but before he could say anything, the hobgoblin continued. “Could you maybe leave through the front entrance?”

"I guess?" Jake said, not really thinking much of the weird request when he did hear it. However, the hobgoblin grinned from ear to ear as if he had just won some massive prize.

"Right this way, my lord," the groveling time mage said as he motioned for Jake to go through the workshop.

Honestly, Jake had gotten a lot more bags than he expected, so he just did this small and insignificant favor as he walked out through a door leading to the back and entered the store behind the counter along with the hobgoblin store owner.

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Once they did, all eyes turned to them as the attendant manning the counter backed away. The store was filled with customers who saw Jake and the hobgoblin... okay, they mainly saw Jake, and damn did he feel glad he had worn a mask for his little outing.

"Thank you once more for your visit, Chosen of the Malefic One," the hobgoblin said again as he led Jake out of the store as the sea of people opened a path for them. Jake just followed along as he heard people murmur while they all looked at him before. They finally got outside, and the hobgoblin bowed one final time.

"Please feel free to ever come again, and we will gladly be of assistance once more."

Jake suppressed a sigh as he decided to just be nice and play along and nodded. "I shall if I ever find the need."

With that, he turned and walked off, with luckily no one following him. Through his sphere, he saw a single tear run down the hobgoblin store owner's cheek as he smiled. Yeah, Jake was pretty damn sure he had just lost out on this transaction, even if he had been given a dozen bags of legendary manure... maybe he should do advertisement jobs? Well, it wasn't like he needed any money...

Anyway, Jake hurried along with his day as he headed for his next destination. He wanted to avoid being on the streets as much as possible because, quite frankly, he attracted a bit too much attention. No one actually approached him, but nearly everyone couldn't help but gawk his way when he just wanted to

casually pass by. Annoyingly so, he couldn't just try and sneak around either, as he did want to be seen visiting all sorts of different places.

After the "shitty" shop visit, Jake decided to go to a small base belonging to the Altmar Empire next. He only went there briefly to thank them for their congratulations and was naturally met by some high-ranking young talents from the faction whom he briefly interacted with. He did the same with a few other factions, including those he knew people in. He spent a few hours at both the Risen's base and the one belonging to the Court of Shadows while he tried to be faster in those only filled with strangers. A bit surprisingly, many of the young talents from the factions had already left Nevermore City, so he couldn't meet many of them, but luckily, Casper and his little brother were still there.

He also avoided going to places like the Holy Church. The Dao Sect wasn't an option either, as they didn't really have any base, and Jake wasn't even sure Eron stuck around. Needless to say, the void-related people such as Arnold didn't have some big base either, seeing as they were so rare, but he still tried to make it a point to visit everyone he knew who belonged to a major faction.

Soon, after many hours of way too much socializing and politicking, Jake finally reached his final destination: Valhal.

Luckily, there was a teleporter pretty much right outside the compound belonging to the mercenary war fanatic faction. Speaking of their compound... yeah, it definitely put the Order's to shame. It was massive in size and included far more buildings. There was even a large arena smack in the middle of everything, not to mention the many personal residences spread around the outskirts, all sealed behind thick walls and magical circles. The amount of spatial expansion was also minimal, allowing Jake to get a good look at everything before he even entered using a Pulse of Perception.

The entrance was a large wooden gate with a single guard standing outside. Well, more than a guard, it was a greeter of some sort, and the guy instantly spotted Jake as he appeared at the teleporter that pretty much only people who were visiting the compound ever used.

Jake didn't doubt he sent some kind of message, as four presences appeared within only a few seconds. He recognized none of them, but from their auras, it was clear the man in the center was in charge. The man was two full heads taller than Jake and had a pretty slim build compared to the three around him, who were all bald, muscular dudes wearing fur and leather clothes. The man in charge wore a pretty nice robe, as Jake felt the use of Identify on him, and responded in kind as he identified the man he felt pretty damn sure was S-grade.

[Human – lvl ??? – Divine Blessing of Olav the Wise]

“Apologies for the disrespect. I merely had to confirm,” the man said as he cupped his hands and bowed. “Welcome, Lord Thayne. I am Olaf the Not-Yet-Wise, the current head of Valhal’s presence in Nevermore City. Well, for mortal affairs, anyway. ”

Jake instantly noted two things. First of all, poor guy having that name, his god must really hate him. Secondly, they called him Lord Thayne and not any of his other titles. Jake felt like this wasn’t merely coincidental, almost as if they would prefer to not call him the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

“Glad you would have me,” Jake simply answered politely, taking extra note of the many scouts who had an eye on him. He counted... about four hundred people? With more than a dozen of those gods, not counting Villy who had definitely enjoyed Jake’s day of going around doing social stuff.

“We’re never going to say no to an honored warrior who wants to visit,” the man smiled as he motioned for Jake to come in with him. “Ah, I also believe the Runemaiden of the War God has been informed of your arrival. She should arrive shortly as long as she is not preoccupied.”

“It’s fine either way; I can go see her myself,” Jake said, making the man named Olaf raise an eyebrow before just smiling and nodding.

“Naturally. The Runemaiden has her own residence in the northeastern section. However, I do believe she is coming either way, if for nothing else but to show you around the compound,” the man explained. “The entire compound outside of any private residences will naturally be open to you, and you are free to enjoy any amenities as if you were already a part of Valhal.”

Jake nodded and walked through the gates together with the guy called Olaf. It was only now that Jake fully entered the compound, and he felt the majority of observers be cut off by the defenses of Valhal. Soon, the remaining gods also cut off their connection, likely to avoid offending anyone they shouldn’t offend, leaving Jake with only his usual scaled stalker.

Also, Jake didn’t doubt that the fact they had that entire conversation with so many onlookers was entirely on purpose. Especially the last part about him being treated as if he was “already a part of Valhal.”

It was as unsubtle as you could get without outright stating they wanted Jake to join. Jake also didn't rebuff the statement, likely making many assume he was, at the very least, considering it. That, or Jake truly sucked at reading between the lines, even if what was written between said lines was barely a font size smaller than the actual lines.

The latter was definitely a possibility if Jake didn't have political stuff hammered into his head over and over so many damn times.

Soon, the words of Olaf were proven true as he saw Carmen approach from afar... and he was pretty sure she had been preoccupied when he arrived. At least her two red fists and blood-splattered clothes indicated she had been busy.

Vilastromoz had indeed enjoyed Jake's day of socializing as he still sat within the Order compound and relaxed. There was just something special about his Chosen going around trying to act all polite while feeling awkward, making others assume he was just prideful or haughty due to his reserved attitude. It had been fun in Nevermore, but it was even more fun now that Jake's awkwardness could have an actual impact on multiversal politics.

But, hey, at least Jake hadn't done too badly yet. The Viper had nearly expected him to have accidentally proposed to some young princess or something like that at this point, but sadly, that had yet to happen. Oh well, he still had many chances.

As the Viper was just relaxing, a figure walked toward the room he was sitting in. He felt the aura of an unknown god but quickly saw this god's appearance, and before the other god could even open the door, the Viper made a small request. "Well, hello there. Hey, could you do me a favor and turn that smile upside down?"

The door opened, and the Viper saw the smiling visage of the unknown god, whom the Viper already had a very good idea who was.

"You already know that is not an option," the god... no, Eversmile, responded.

"True, true. But always worth a shot," Vilastromoz nodded. "Now, why the impromptu visit?"

"I take it your Chosen didn't share anything about brief interaction within the conference hall?" Eversmile asked.

Vilastromoz raised an eyebrow. "No, he didn't, but now you sure got me curious."

"No matter, I shall not waste time for either of us: what are those boots he is wearing?"

The Viper was a bit surprised by the question. However, he quickly understood but played dumb as he smiled. "Oh, yeah, I know. They look so old and unsightly for a Chosen to wear them. He should really get them fixed by a leatherworker or something, huh? I'll be sure to give him some proper leather-maintenance product next we meet."

Chapter 886: The Mystery Deepens

Should Jake question why Carmen was half-covered in blood? Maybe. He didn't overly care, though, as he waved when he saw her come over. "Hello again."

"You got here faster than expected, huh? Didn't anyone wanna host you longer or what?" Carmen commentated, and Jake saw his escort grimace at her curt tone. Even the poor S-grade threw Carmen a look, which she seemed to not notice or care about. As things should be.

"No, they all threw me out on the streets," Jake said with an exaggerated sigh. "I only came here because I accidentally started four or five wars due to my sheer political incompetence and reckoned Valhal would be on-theme as my next visit."

"Oh, so you're looking to hire us, eh?" Carmen smiled. "Not gonna be cheap. I hope those potions have been selling."

"If all else fails, I'll just have to take out a payday loan... or does Valhal do commissions on credit? I can pay back in installments," Jake kept joking.

"If the Chosen desires to hire any mercenari-" one of the three bald warriors commented as Carmen threw him a look, making him shut up.

“For fuck sake,” she muttered before looking back at Jake. “See what I’m working with here?”

Olaf also sighed at the warrior, who looked confused for a moment. It appeared as if he had the situation explained to him telepathically in the next moment, as he looked like he wanted to somehow make himself smaller. Quite a tough task for someone of his size.

“Oh well, that killed the mood,” Carmen shrugged. “Guess I should do that formal stuff. Welcome to the Nevermore Valhal Compound or whatever the official name is.”

“Thanks for having me,” Jake smiled. “Now, I feel like it’s only polite to ask, but who did you just beat to death?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, no. I was just having some light spars with some of the young ones who just got here and talked shit and groups who already did Nevermore and didn’t accomplish fuck-all,” Carmen scoffed, clearly annoyed. “They were bitching about there being no one from Valhal on any of the top 10 Leaderboards; who the fuck gives them the right to talk? These are groups who didn’t even hit the top 1000... they deserved a good lesson.”

“I see,” Jake nodded as he smiled teasingly. “Say, why didn’t Valhal take any of the top spots?”

Carmen glared at him as she shook her head. “Because we had a few dead weights in the party, and the Challenge Dungeons were absolute shit. Seriously, they sucked ass, every single one of them. Test of Character only tested how much bullshit I could keep up with, Neverending Journey was like going back to my old retail job, Minaga’s Labyrinth was just shitty equations and puzzles, House of the Architect was a bloody waste of time, and the one with any promise, Colosseum of Mortals, was ruined by its idiotic rules.”

“I would have thought you would do decently in the Colosseum?” Jake questioned.

“See these,” Carmen asked, raising a hand. “Yeah, right now, I can catch a speartip or use my palm to deflect swords. In the Colosseum, I would lose a damn hand if anything sharp hit it. I had to go back to how I fought before, making me feel like I regressed, and ultimately I had to pick up some fist weapons and stuff... it sucked.”

Jake slowly nodded. “Yeah... does sound like a bit of an oversight, honestly.”

“Sure as hell does,” Carmen sighed. “Anyway, wanna go show off in front of them or have a look around first?”

“Are you offering a tour of the compound?”

“I feel like Olaf here would get mad if I didn’t,” Carmen said, throwing the S-grade a smile.

“It does sound like I’m no longer needed here and am just getting in the way,” Olaf said with a nod. “I will be in the central building if there is anything. Do not hesitate to come by.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jake responded as he saw Olaf leave, the man not even trying to hide his smile from Jake and Carmen’s interactions. It was pretty understandable why, too. Jake and Carmen didn’t make it a secret they were close, and if Olaf had been tasked with trying to make Jake feel welcome, it had to be a huge relief to see the two of them interact.

“Now, what do you wanna see first?” Carmen asked once the guy was gone as she pulled out a washcloth and cleaned herself up a bit.

“Any recommendations?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Just a few. First of all, we could go check out the arena and maybe even go for a bit of a spar if you’re up for it and not afraid of me hurting your pride. Secondly, we could go check out some of the training facilities, as Valhal has some interesting ones, including an archery range where you can spatially expand the range itself. Third, we could visit my personal residence, where having another kind of spar is possible,” Carmen offered, giving him a knowing wink.

“You know what... I think I’ll take the second one first,” Jake responded. “A spatially expanding archery range sounds pretty damn cool.”

“Right,” Carmen smiled, shaking her head. “My place is this way.”

Jake looked at her weirdly as Carmen stopped herself mid-step. “Wait, you’re serious?”

Scratching the back of his head, Jake couldn't help but look toward where he thought this training area was. "We can go to your place after?"

Carmen looked at Jake incredulously for a bit before just shaking her head and smirking. "Fine, let's go play at the archery range... man, are you a nerd sometimes."

"Maybe that's what it takes to reach the top of the Leaderboards," Jake said, trying to look deep in thought. "Arnold also placed pretty highly, you know."

"Man, fuck you," Carmen sighed. "We're definitely also making a visit to the arena later."

"Does sound kind of fun," Jake agreed. He was genuinely interested in seeing just how strong Carmen had become.

He could feel her aura, and it felt kind of... odd. It was incredibly stable, to the level of it being unnatural. Usually, people leaked energy all the time, but Carmen barely gave off anything. He knew part of the reason for this was her lack of mana, but even with stamina, one burned it all the time just moving around. Carmen surely did, too, but it seemed either far less than everyone else, or she had some way to keep everything internally somehow.

It had to have something to do with her unique Path as a Runemaiden. A Path that definitely was powerful, as the presence she did leak was unmistakably a top-tier one. So, a little visit to the arena to see just how tough she had gotten sounded fun, and he wouldn't say no to another kind of spar before or after either.

But first... archery range.

And, damn, was it everything Jake had hoped for.

"So I can just turn this knob and... wow," Jake muttered as he stood with a control panel floating in front of him. Turning a single knob, he saw the target move further away and come closer again, based on how he adjusted it. There were several other buttons, too, some of which added different kinds of

targets, changed the nature of the environmental mana, and even summoned projected creatures for aim practice.

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What's more, it had different "modes" for everything from D to A-grade. Jake was currently in the B-grade version, where he could expand the range to what looked like an entire planet away. The only limitation was that Jake had to stay on the metal platform he was on, or everything would return to normal.

Carmen was with him, standing with her arms crossed as she looked at Jake, playing with the options. "You like it?"

"This is beyond my expectations," Jake muttered. It felt as if he was in some sci-fi virtual space, but everything was real. The spatial expansion was just insane, though it was done using some ingenious means. By limiting what had to move within the expanded area, the space had to be far less stable all around, while it also didn't have to house any living beings. It also didn't really add any details when it expanded space, making it far, far more efficient. Still had to take up a lot of energy, but definitely not as much as one would expect... because Jake learned another interesting detail.

"Apparently, it was made by the Altmar Empire, and they made it by first creating the largest possible archery range and then shrank that down, making any expansion far, far cheaper, as spatial shrinking is a lot easier. Valhal has a few similar training grounds here and there similar to this, though in many cases, they also just make custom dungeons to practice within," Carmen shared.

"I should definitely look into getting one of these myself," Jake said as he pulled out his bow and shot a few arrows. All of them hit, as Jake tried to expand the range a bit more before he took more shots.

"Is it just me, or are your arrows somehow accelerating the further they fly?" Carmen asked with a frown.

"Yep," Jake nodded.

"That... doesn't make much sense."

“Nope,” Jake agreed.

“But I guess it’s pretty damn useful,” Carmen muttered.

“Definitely is.”

Jake ended up spending another three hours or so in the training hall, also seeing some of the other facilities. There were some things Jake had never even considered one might need, including what was effectively weight-lifting equipment.

Carmen explained these weren’t really to train but to become more aware of your own power and how you applied your different muscles while completing tasks. This area was also pretty damn busy, and Jake saw many members of Valhal be engrossed as they did their practice.

While stats did mean the majority, the ability of each individual to apply those stats still mattered a lot. The difference between getting punched by someone who knew how to throw a punch and someone who didn’t wasn’t small, and with ethereal elements such as concepts also getting more and more mixed into every action one made, things got even more complicated.

Theoretically, Jake understood why someone might need machines like these... it was just that he couldn’t see why he, in particular, would need them. He already had a good grasp of his own power, and he felt as if he was pretty decent at using his body optimally. At least he felt like he was good at it.

It had to be noted that anyone who could reach C-grade already had a high understanding of themselves and that the differences wouldn’t be like the one between a professional and an amateur. It was more like that of an athlete and a top athlete.

“Wanna give it a shot?” Carmen asked as they stood before what looked like a shoulder press machine.

“I guess,” Jake shrugged as he took a seat.

“Remember, it’s not about using your full power on this one, but all about efficiency,” she reminded him.

Needless to say, a small crowd had gathered at this point upon seeing the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. They all looked on with interest as Jake grabbed the two handles and lifted up without really thinking much, making sure to engage the right back muscles by instinct. He did a few lifts, keeping a consistent pace before stopping.

“This does bring back memories of going to the gym before the system,” Jake smiled as he got up. “Anyway, how did I do? Does it even have some way of measuring?”

Carmen just looked at Jake with a glare. “Alright, time to visit the arena.”

“Why?” Jake asked, genuinely confused.

“Just... fuck you,” Carmen muttered as he turned and saw the machine did have a small display he hadn’t seen before. And, well... 99.95% did seem like a good percentage if Jake said so himself. The approving looks he got all around from the observers also confirmed Jake was indeed a master lifter.

“Did I break a record or something?” Jake asked Carmen as they walked out.

“You broke my damn record,” she said, shaking her head. “And by so little that it’s annoying.”

“... sorry?” Jake muttered.

“Just allow me at least one good punch in the arena, yeah?”

“Yeah... having seen some of the punches you’ve thrown in the past, not gonna make that promise,” Jake said defensively as they approached the arena.

On the terrace, the Viper was still smiling as he teased the shapeshifter, not really paying much attention to Jake playing around at the Valhal compound.

Eversmile's visage changed as he returned to his "usual" form. He stared at the Viper with a level of seriousness the god rarely displayed. A look he had seen his fellow Primordial have several times before and always in the same circumstances.

He's starving... starving to know what's going on. The mystery is too intriguing for him to handle," the Viper concluded, as he couldn't help but broaden his smile even more.

Eversmile cared about studying karma more than anything else in the entire multiverse. The intrinsic web of connections formed between people, locations, objects, and anything that ever interacted with a soul. He wanted to explore every detail in an environment where details were infinite.

Over the years, he uncovered more and more as the "big" mysteries started to disappear and most of the time, he was actively seeking out new scenarios through his own experiments to make new major discoveries. However, now he had been faced with a new mystery when he saw Jake wearing boots with a powerful and unusual connection to the Malefic Viper, and even if it wasn't necessarily that big of a mystery, it was still-

"You know exactly what I mean... why do those boots have a powerful karmic connection with every single Primordial, myself included?" Eversmile asked as the Viper's smile instantly disappeared.

"What?

He... did not know that.

"What do you mean with what?" Eversmile said, getting riled up. "You gave him those boots."

"The system did," Vilastromoz said, deep in thought. "Can you explain what you meant when you said those boots have a powerful karmic connection with all of you?"

"Exactly what I said. Those boots are connected to us, and I cannot discern the cause," Eversmile said. "My best theory right now is that this is due to your Records as a Primordial bleeding into them over time, which managed to form a karmic connection between the boots and anyone else with the title of Primordial. Boots, as equipment, represent the art of travel, progress, and shortening the distance

between two destinations... it is theoretically possible for some of these concepts to have led to this, but I believe there is more behind it.”

The Viper remained silent as he listened to Eversmile talk with a fervor he rarely displayed. He understood why, too... because Vilastromoz earnestly wasn't certain either. The boots were connected to him, yes... but also the First Sage. If it was him...

Deciding not to hesitate, the Viper waved his hand as a projection of a human man appeared. “Do you recognize this person?”

It was naturally a projection of the First Sage. It was odd, but Vilastromoz had never shown him to even another Primordial. In fact, he hadn't thought overly much about his first and only Master for many eras. It was only now his name suddenly appeared so much... the Viper pretty much knew it had something to do with Jake. He definitely didn't believe that any random person would have been rewarded with the same boots. They had been given to Jake specifically.

Eversmile looked at the projection closely, studying every detail before shaking his head. “No, I do not. Why? Who is he?”

Vilastromoz smiled as he looked toward the sky. “You know... these days, I'm asking myself that more and more.”

“Is he related to these boots?” the other Primordial pressed him.

“More likely than not,” Vilastromoz nodded as he dispelled the projection.

“Who is he? What's his name?” Eversmile asked, clearly intrigued who this mysterious figure might be.

“I actually never learned his name, but he was known as the First Sage,” the Viper responded with a nostalgic smile.

Eversmile kept staring at the Viper oddly as he just stood there for a moment, as it felt like an eternity passed before the Primordial asked again. "So? Are you going to tell me why those boots carry a karmic connection with all twelve of us Primordials?"

The Viper frowned before shaking his head at the rare Eversmile joke. "Very funny. Good one."

"Good one, what?" Eversmile asked, showing signs of genuine frustration.

"Wait... you're not fucking with me, are you?" Vilastromoz said as he stood up. Without waiting for an answer, he summoned the projection of First Sage again. "Do you know who this is?"

Eversmile looked at the projection... studying it closely once more as if it was his first time seeing it, before shaking his head. "No, I do not. Why? Who is he?"

"The First Sage."

Silence returned as the seconds ticked by.

Eversmile suddenly furrowed his brows and got a serious look in his eyes. "This... we were discussing the boots and their karmic connection with every Primordial... but..."

Finally, the other Primordial realized what was going on at about the same time as the Viper did. They stared at each other in realization as Vilastromoz and Eversmile muttered the truth they had both realized in unison.

"Forbidden Knowledge."

This just left one grand question... why the fuck was information about the First Sage considered Forbidden Knowledge? Actually, make that two grand questions... why could Jake know about it?

Chapter 887: Forbidden Knowledge

Eversmile departed soon after, even more perplexed than when he arrived. This left Vilastromoz alone back on the terrace with his own thoughts as a deep frown marred his face. A lot of things weren't making any sense right now. For something to be Forbidden Knowledge was... not normal.

To clarify, for the system to hide information wasn't anything new at all. Restricted Knowledge was a relatively simple term, as it just referred to knowledge restricted by the system, as the name very obviously implied. It wasn't any big secret either, and everyone encountered it throughout their Paths. Hell, it was what restricted people from sharing information about the Nevermore Floors or Challenge Dungeons to those who had yet to do the World Wonder.

This Nevermore example also nicely showcased another aspect of Restricted Knowledge: it varied widely to whom knowledge was restricted. For Nevermore, people like Jake could now talk openly about the World Wonder with anyone else who had either done it or wasn't capable of doing it. In other words, anyone who had done Nevermore, or anyone at B-grade or above, could openly talk and hear about the C-grade version of Nevermore.

Forbidden Knowledge was a step above Restricted Knowledge. It was knowledge one was incapable of sharing at all with anyone but others who also already knew... with it many times even being a truth only you knew. In many instances, it also restricted people from ever learning these truths, to begin with, and simply being told Forbidden Knowledge was impossible.

Impossible for anyone but the Malefic Viper, that is. Because the concept of Forbidden Knowledge did not exist to him. He possessed the Bloodline of the Immortal Mind, a Bloodline that did nothing but give him perfect memory... which meant that he never forgot even that which was forbidden. Vilastromoz was likely the only one in the multiverse who could simply be told something that was considered Forbidden Knowledge and remember it.

This led to him being called the Keeper of Forbidden Knowledge by certain beings. Especially the Void Gods referred to him as such. Unsurprisingly, considering that they knew more Forbidden Knowledge than even the Primordials, and Oras had gleamed many secrets, he could now only share with the Malefic Viper. This led to the Viper safekeeping a lot of knowledge that many would consider useless... but could be highly valuable for someone seeking to use the system cleverly.

However, the thing that still made no sense about the First Sage was... he had not been Forbidden Knowledge before.

It wasn't as if no one knew about the First Sage before Jake became the Viper's Chosen. He had mentioned him to several people throughout the ages... yet this kind of response had never happened before. He had spoken for hours with his wife, and he even remembered referring to the First Sage a few times when he taught Sanguine back in the day, as the would-be creator of the vampire race sought to create a Transcendent skill, and the First Sage was naturally an expert at that.

Back then, there hadn't ever been a problem, and while people were certainly alarmed whenever the Viper spoke of this C-grade master of his, they could definitely remember their conversations. What had changed besides Jake making contact?

He had to get to the bottom of this as he had to confirm something and remembered a certain someone. Vilastromoz had not shared anything about the First Sage with many... but his right-hand hydra had known about his existence for sure. Without delay, he had one of his avatars seek out Snappy within the hydra's own realm.

"Master! To what do I owe the--"

"Skip the pleasantries," the Malefic Viper interrupted the hydra, Snappy instantly realizing the Viper was being serious.

"What's the issue?" the Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper asked.

"Do you remember someone called the First Sage?" the Viper asked, closely studying the hydra.

For a few seconds, there was no reaction before the hydra questioned him. "Did you just attempt to share Forbidden Knowledge?"

"Apparently, I did," Vilastromoz frowned even more than before as he clenched his fists. For Snappy to have forgotten... this was a lot more than something simply getting a new designation as Forbidden Knowledge.

The Malefic Viper knew only of one precedent where this could happen. Removing existing memories that were already ingrained in the Records of a Truesoul was something the system never did. To take away long-term memories could be damaging in far too many ways, as the risk of it hurting someone's Path was simply too high.

However, it could happen, just not by the system causing it. The only time he had ever encountered this was as an aftereffect of one of the most feared and powerful Transcendent Skills in the entire multiverse: Karmic Annihilation. Eversmile's Transcendence.

The ability to remove someone from existence. To kill them completely, erasing even the Records and all memories anyone would have ever had of them. Complete and utter death, in every sense of the word. It was such a powerful technique that even Eversmile would find himself affected, unaware of who he had used it on. He would know he had used it, but all memories of why and who would be gone, and that was naturally far from the only backlash he would suffer.

To summarize... he could delete someone and turn anything related to their existence into Forbidden Knowledge.

Only the Malefic Viper would remember.

This wasn't caused by Eversmile, though. The Viper would have felt if it was... but it was likely caused by something similar. A Transcendent Skill cast by someone else, and it wasn't hard to figure out who. The First Sage was the one behind this. He had made his own existence into Forbidden Knowledge, and the Viper had no idea why.

The First Sage was dead. He died in the first era.

No ifs. No buts. He was dead.

Vilastromoz had refused to believe a being like him would simply have died, and he had done all he could to confirm the death of his master until he finally got it confirmed by the system itself. Even now, the Viper did not doubt this fact.

He was dead... yet now he was sending echoes through time. For what purpose, the Viper truly couldn't comprehend, but... it had to have something to do with Jake, right?

Jake had no idea about anything the Viper was doing, as he was busy being in quite the situation himself. Standing within an arena, Carmen stood opposite him, wearing her leather armor with a big grin

on her face. The stands around them were absolutely filled to the brim with members of Valhal who wouldn't miss out on a fight between the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Runemaiden of Valdemar to save their lives.

By now, Jake was kind of regretting agreeing to this, but Carmen had insisted, and he did want to have a spar with her. He could do without the audience, though. Before they began, they also had to set some ground rules because there was no way they would fight at full power.

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"What do you say to no active or boosting skills?" Carmen asked. "No limited items either."

"No bow also seems like a good restriction," Jake generously added a further handicap to himself.

"Dude, we're in a small arena; I would be impressed if using a bow was even feasible without any active skills to create distance," Carmen said in a deadpan tone.

"You underestimate my bowmanship," Jake smiled.

"Fine, no bow either, then," Carmen ended up agreeing. Jake wasn't entirely bullshitting, either. Even if the arena was only about a hundred meters in diameter, Jake was still confident he could have used his bow quite nicely.

The two of them looked at each other for a moment as the crowd cheered loudly. Even Olaf had shown back up, acting as the judge and the one to make sure they didn't accidentally end up killing each other. Not that Jake thought that was an actual risk, but better safe than sorry.

"Are both combatants ready?" Olaf asked. "Remember, no active skills, boosting skills, limited items, and the Chosen is not allowed to use his bow."

"Ready," Carmen nodded as she bent her knees.

“Read-“ Jake tried to say as Carmen shot forward, straight for him.

Fast.

Jake swayed to the side as the fist flew by him, the air vibrating from the blow. Carmen quickly pivoted and did a follow-up, but Jake backed away as he dodged five more quick hits while he retreated further and further back. The crowd cheered as his back was pushed up against the back wall of the arena.

Trying to take advantage, Carmen struck right for his stomach as Jake simply looked down as the blow struck him. He felt all the air being pushed out of his body as he was smashed into the hard stone wall, a solid imprint of a fist on his stomach.

Carmen looked confused and took a step back as Jake got back up and smiled as he wiped the blood from his lips. “You’ve gotten stronger for sure.”

“Why didn’t you dodge?” she asked, perplexed.

“Felt like you needed to at least get one hit in,” Jake said in a calm tone as he spread his hands apart and a katar appeared in each. “Remember our last duel?”

“Yeah? I think I do?” Carmen asked, confused.

“Let’s just say I expect a better performance out of myself this time around.”

Jake still remembered their fight a long time ago. Back then, Jake – to put it nicely – had no idea how to fight in melee properly. He was pure instinct, which did serve him well, but in front of a skilled fighter, he would be in trouble on the offensive front.

However, all that was before Jake got lessons from his other self, who had spent years creating a proper melee fighting method. It was before Sim-Jake... and now Jake was more than eager to see the difference as he decided it was his turn to go on the offensive.

Stabbing forward, Carmen avoided the katar as she tried to counter – something that had worked well for her before Jake’s improvements – but Jake had expected it as he countered her counter. Her fist was deflected slightly to the side as Eternal Hunger struck Carmen in the shoulder... and Jake felt like he had just struck solid metal.

Carmen stumbled back as Jake’s hand hurt from the impact. Even so, he didn’t stop as he attacked again, this time trying to use his Blackpoint Nanoblade and its slightly higher penetrative effect compared to Eternal Hunger.

However, Carmen was ready, as she dodged to the side, throwing a punch as Jake also dodged. The two of them attacked half a dozen times each, both dodging all the blows of the other before Jake finally found an opening. The Blackpoint Nanoblade was slammed down into Carmen’s thigh... only for it to once more fail to penetrate as it slid down the side of her leg, nearly throwing Jake off-balance as he barely managed to jump away.

“Damn, you’re tough,” Jake said as he landed. “It’s like trying to attack Sandy.”

“Did you just compare me to a giant space worm?” Carmen asked, sounding offended.

“A giant Cosmic Genesis Worm,” Jake corrected her. “A very important distinction.”

Carmen didn’t seem to care much about vermeology as she responded by attacking again, Jake gladly meeting her offense. The two of them rapidly moved through the arena, Jake dodging every attack of Carmen, while the vast majority of his own blows also missed. Those he did hit barely seemed to do anything either, as their battle saw little progress.

One thing became clear after a good while. Jake was faster than Carmen, but Carmen had more raw Strength. Durability-wise, Carmen also had a massive edge, and she likely also had more Endurance due to her stamina-only Path. However... in every other category, Jake had her handily beat. He simply had far more raw stats than her, and while hers being focused on only a few stats did allow her to keep up, the disparity was clear.

Without skills, though, Jake couldn’t really show off many of his stats, allowing their fight to look relatively equal. Then again, even if Jake could use skills, he probably wouldn’t want to because one other thing was also pretty clear... this was a lot of fun.

Jake smiled as he and Carmen traded blows, the woman also enjoying the bout even if she failed to land any blows. Several minutes passed, and despite little changing, the crowd and the combatants were fully engrossed in the fight as the two fighters got more and more accustomed to how the other one fought.

“Would you mind if I changed things up a bit?” Jake asked as they clashed for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Still no active skills,” Carmen reminded him as she deflected a katar and tried to punch him in the chin.

“It won’t be,” Jake smiled as he dodged another attack and landed a solid kick, making Carmen slide backward.

Before she could fully stabilize, the area lit up as the ground below her exploded with destructive arcane energy. Jake didn’t hesitate to continue his attack as Carmen lost her footing, slamming a katar into her stomach. As a follow-up, more than thirty bolts of destructive arcane mana popped into existence around him, which he promptly sent forward.

“No active skills,” Olaf reminded him with a frown.

“It’s not,” Jake smiled, leaping forward to strike alongside his arcane bolts.

Even if his melee hits did little to nothing, Jake still believed his arcane energy should have some effect. At the very least, it should lower her durability somewhat and allow Jake to do some actual damage... at least, that’s what he hoped would happen.

It wasn’t.

Attacking in tandem with all the exploding bolts, Jake expected them to create an opening but instead just found Carmen grinning as she charged straight through them. A large explosion erupted as all the bolts went off, and through the explosion, Jake saw Carmen’s form. Runes lit up wherever bare skin could be seen, as the arcane energy did nothing... no, it did do something. Just not anything good from Jake’s point of view.

With runes glowing intensely, Carmen suddenly sped up, as she flew through the explosion and appeared before Jake sooner than he had expected. He dodged her first blow, but she managed to barely grab onto his clothes as she pulled him in and punched him in the chest, sending him flying back.

Jake stabilized in mid-air as he did a somersault and landed on the ground safely. "I thought no active skills."

"All passive," Carmen grinned as the runes on her body faded.

"A pretty damn overpowered one at that," Jake muttered.

"You find it strange the runes of a Runemaiden are powerful?" Carmen threw smirked. "Also... I think this makes it two hits."

"Aight, you got me," Jake also smiled. Though in his defense, he had not seen that coming at all. He kind of expected Carmen to have high magic resistance, but what he had just seen was far above that. Those runes hadn't simply negated the mana; they had absorbed it and temporarily turned it into a burst of power.

It was like she had a Palate of the Malefic Viper skill... just against magic. This also explained why her aura felt so off and muted. She was absorbing energy at all times, making it look like there was less in her immediate vicinity.

"Let's see how you respond to this, though," Jake said as another dozen arcane bolts appeared around him, making Carmen scoff.

"Pretty sure you already saw the result once."

"Nah, I feel like this time will be different," Jake said as he charged once more, seemingly repeating his move from before.

Carmen likely suspected something was off but still charged in kind. Right as they clashed, the arcane bolts hit Carmen... and didn't explode. Instead, they struck her like hard crystals, throwing her slightly off-balance and allowing Jake to put proper power into his blow as he stabbed her in the stomach.

The Runemaiden was blasted back from the impact, smashing into the back wall making a nice human imprint. However, more than that... a small trickle of blood ran down her stomach, where his Blackpoint Nanoblade had barely managed to penetrate.

"So you can bleed," Jake said as Carmen pushed herself loose. He saw her wound was already healing, but he felt satisfied managing to at least do some damage. She really was ridiculously resilient, though Jake knew this resilience came with other drawbacks.

"What the hell were those bolts?" Carmen muttered.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," Jake said as more appeared around him.

"Damn straight, I will," Carmen gritted her teeth as she kicked off the wall behind her, making a section of it collapse as she launched herself toward Jake.

Chapter 888: Pillow Talk

"But it's actually just pure mana?" Carmen asked, still not entirely believing Jake's claims. "Definitely didn't feel like mana."

"Pure arcane mana," Jake corrected her. "The stable variant, that is."

"Hm, the stabby ones did feel borderline identical to the exploding ones... though the exploding ones maybe felt a bit more aggressive in nature?" she pondered aloud.

"They are definitely more aggressive, hence why they wanna explode," Jake smiled teasingly as he turned his head and looked at Carmen, who was lying with her hands behind her pillow, staring at the ceiling.

The two of them were currently at Carmen's place in Nevermore City, inside one of the private residences available only to top members. As someone who had been able to attend the get-together for those who did well on the Leaderboards, Carmen was naturally viewed as a top member. Then again, even if she had done horribly, the mere fact she was a Runemaiden of Valdemar was already enough to get her this designation.

Their duel in the arena had gone on for a few more minutes, but ultimately, there was little progress on either side. Jake could do some minor damage here and there, but Carmen was self-healing quite well. At the same time, Carmen couldn't land any good hits on Jake. Finding a winner would have required them to keep going until one of them ran out of resources, and while Jake didn't doubt the crowd would have enjoyed that, Jake and Carmen couldn't be bothered.

Without any skills, their resources would have lasted for hours, and who really had the time for that? Sure, they could have switched over to using skills, but the arena spar wasn't a real fight, and if Jake was being honest, he didn't want to reveal his skills in front of a crowd.

After their fight, they had naturally both been a bit worked up and decided to go to Carmen's place to "compare notes" and "reflect on their battle." Which was definitely what they did. Definitely. Why else would they now both be lying naked in the bed?

"Maybe I should also work on getting an arcane affinity," Carmen muttered. "Then again, the only two people I know with one are you and Eron... well, besides the gods and stuff."

"It isn't like arcane affinities are necessarily better either," Jake shrugged. "They just seem like that because the affinity naturally fits the person who made it extremely well. Look at Sylphie; she just has the "basic" wind affinity, and I sure as hell wouldn't call that weak."

"Pretty sure she has more than just basic wind. I heard something about Sylphs being a thing, and I'm pretty sure she's related to those," Carmen pointed out.

"Still just wind affinity," Jake shook his head as he sat up. "Maybe empowered a bit and of a certain flavor, but it's still wind magic."

"Hm, I guess you're right," Carmen relented as she looked deep in thought.

"Honestly, I'm more curious as to how exactly your level of durability even makes sense," Jake said as he leaned over and poked her arm. "Feels and looks like soft human skin, but it felt like striking metal whenever I hit it."

Carmen didn't even comment on his pokes as she also sat up. "I guess it's a mix between reacting to what is considered attacks and not attacks mixed with... what did you call it again? System-fuckery? Yeah, that thing."

"Huh. Well, thank fuck for system-fuckery, then. I assume this is also why you can move normally despite your durability and tough skin? I would assume it to be less flexible by default."

"Probably," Carmen semi-agreed as she opened and closed a fist. "It's pretty sweet, though. I used to be really careful when fighting, and I had to make sure not to take any hits... now, I can take quite a beating without much struggle while giving plenty more back."

"That actually got me thinking... this Runemaiden stuff also empowered your internals, right?" Jake asked curiously.

"Yep, it's all-around," she said with a grin. "Though some parts are more affected than others. My bones and skin more than anything else. So, pro-tip: if you ever need to kill another Runemaiden, aim for the eyes. That's probably our biggest weakness."

"Thanks for the tip, but I was more thinking: how nerfed were you in our little spar? I remember you using a lot of boosting skills that took a heavy load on your body, and these must be a fuckload more powerful now, right?"

"You bet my boosting skills are a fuckload better now," Carmen grinned. "But I'm not gonna act like I would have had an advantage with boosting skills. Sure, mine may have been better than yours, but I'm not confident they would have allowed me to land anything decisive. Besides, you would also have way stronger offenses if that happened, and while I'm tough, I'm not invincible. Using boosting skills too much also negatively affects my durability; I learned that the hard way quite a few times in Nevermore."

"I see, I see," Jake nodded. "Say, is it okay for you to be sharing details about Runemaidens like this?"

"Who cares? Valdemar sure as fuck doesn't strike me as the sort of guy who would," Carmen shrugged unbothered before turning a bit more serious. "He does seriously want you to join Valhal, by the way. Gudrun is also entirely on board, and after your Leaderboards placement, I doubt anyone would dare protest."

"I know he's interested," Jake just smiled, not really touching on the subject further. Even if he trusted Carmen, he wouldn't share with her details about how his relationship with the Malefic Viper truly was. The fewer knew about his status as a Heretic-Chosen, the better.

"Personally... I don't really think you should join," Carmen said after a few seconds.

"Hm?" Jake exclaimed, surprised.

"Think about it. If you join, you'll likely be made the Chosen of Valdemar, or at least someone with a higher position than me, which will make things really fucking awkward. Moreover... I wouldn't want the competition," she said, smiling during the last part.

"You're aiming to become Valdemar's Chosen?" Jake asked.

"Sure as fuck giving it a shot. I need to if I want to even try and keep up with all of you other damn monsters... seriously, why the fuck are so many of the strongest people in this generation from Earth?"

"Not a clue," Jake smiled, shaking his head, at least happy to know others shared those feelings.

"It's just weird," Carmen sighed.

The two of them didn't say more as they were silent for a while. After a bit, Jake took out the disc he had been handed by the Demon Prince, having decided to read it over. Carmen saw him take it out, Jake having already explained to her earlier he planned on spending a few days in the Valhal compound, partly to study this disc.

Seemingly not wanting to disturb him, Carmen got dressed and went out into the courtyard of her personal residence to do some training. Jake got curious and decided to see how she was training before he fully immersed his mind in the disc.

He saw her take up a position in the middle of a small open area as she closed her eyes and took deep breaths. Then, her eyes shot open as she punched forward, followed by several more strikes into thin air. She barely moved faster than a regular pre-system human as she boxed with a seemingly invisible opponent, and she even dodged and weaved in between unseen blows. After about a minute, Jake realized something. The way she moved, dodged, struck... was similar to their spar. Not in that it was the general moves, but the entire flow was recognizable.

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She's shadowboxing a version of me? Jake questioned as he looked at her practice a bit longer. Even from within the building, he could feel the odd energy surrounding Carmen and her intense and unbroken focus as she was entirely immersed in her imagined fight. Some pretty powerful concepts were also at play, and Jake even felt some faint energy come out of the ground beneath her. With a second inspection, he noticed that the huge magic circle spanning the entirety of Valhal's compound faintly responded, a small part of it active, seemingly facilitating and assisting in training like this.

It really is a peak faction for fighting fanatics, huh,

Jake thought with a light smile. With things like this and the archery range, maybe Jake should just see if he could join Valhal as an honorary member. Or, at the very least, blackmail Villy into giving him cool stuff like the archery range.

He really wanted an archery range.

Jake looked on only a bit more before he decided it was time to focus on his own matters. Delving into the disc, Jake began to study the proposed ritual by the Demon Prince, and his first impression was that it felt... kind of familiar? It definitely had many conceptual aspects in common with some of the rituals Jake had done before. There was also a lot of new to it, though, and it was a more complex ritual than anything Jake had ever done before. Besides maybe the one that helped birth Vesperia, however, that ritual had been one that required several stages and whatnot, while this ritual would be a one-and-done.

He also saw that he would not be doing this ritual alone. Several C-grade demons would assist him, but Jake would be the main maestro. The conductor who controlled everything. It was a bit similar to the ritual he had done with Mystie and Hawkie to help hatch Sylphie. This one would require the other helpers to do quite a bit more than Hawkie and Jake had to back then, but everything would be up to the discretion of Jake.

In fact, Jake was pretty quickly beginning to understand why the Demon Prince had asked him. This ritual was not one created to be performed by a C-grade, especially not a mid-tier C-grade. Moreover, based on Jake's analysis, the person performing the ritual had to be within only a dozen or so levels of the Demon Prince, or it simply wouldn't work due to the disparity in quality. While each grade was a massive jump, each level within every grade was also a small step, and having someone atop the staircase try to do this ritual wouldn't lead to any good results for the demon.

Coupled with the extreme requirements of the ritual master – the one in charge of the ritual – Jake could see how it would be difficult to find someone qualified. It was also easy to see, especially when the Demon Prince also factored in Jake's identity as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins, that Jake seemed like perhaps the best choice in the multiverse. And while the process of creating creatures like Vesperia was a lot simpler than most probably expected, it still wasn't easy.

With all of this in mind, one ultimate question remained: did Jake have confidence in pulling off this proposed ritual?

Well, he would give it at least a fifty-fifty. It was definitely harder than anything he had ever done before, but Jake had also grown a lot stronger since he last did any major rituals, outside of the one with the Twinhead Ogre, but that was more fucking up an existing ritual circle.

Over these last fifty years, he had definitely progressed a lot when it came to ritualism. In addition, he specialized in Soul Ritualism, which this ritual definitely fell under. From his analysis, the primary bottleneck with this ritual also wasn't pure skill or the knowledge of the ritual master but as much the insane minimum requirement of control and stats. There was a lot of powerful energy to keep track of at once, and some of this energy would be related to the Cerulean Devil. Most wouldn't even dare try and touch anything related to a god... but Jake didn't really care overly much.

One annoying thing did become clear, though.

I'll need to throw in some Jake Juice as a binding agent of sorts, he noted to himself. Not a lot of it, just enough to nudge things to merge together. Maybe other alchemists or ritual experts could find some

way to make them merge without this method, but Jake sure as hell didn't know any. With what he was reading from the disc provided by the Demon Prince, the demons sure didn't have any set plans either but would "leave the merging process entirely up to the Chosen's discretion."

A nice way of asking him to please figure out how to do it.

He already had a rough idea what kind of approach he wanted to take after just checking over all the information once, but he still had to fully familiarize himself with the role of every one of his would-be assistants and get a comprehensive understanding of everything that would go down. At least one good enough so that he could handle everything that went wrong on the fly by following his instincts.

Jake did also have to consider the-

"Damn, you're deep, you've been at it for hours," Carmen's voice interrupted Jake's train of thought as he opened his eyes and stared into Carmen's that were right in front of his face.

"I'm focused," Jake smiled as he didn't move. "And for the record, I did see you coming."

"Sure as hell didn't react."

"Why would I?" Jake kept smiling.

"Out of politeness?" Carmen shot back, leaning slightly closer. "Maybe I wanted something?"

"And what may you want?"

Carmen smiled deeply as she leaned in and whispered in his ear: "I want you to touch me... with Touch of the Malefic Viper."

Jake's smile faded as the mood quickly died, and Carmen leaned back with a big grin on her face. "More specifically, I want to see if you can get through my defenses."

"I see you've upped your game when it comes to mental attacks," Jake said as he pushed her off the bed with a small push.

She landed easily on her feet, still grinning. "Or maybe the target was just too susceptible to this particular kind of attack. Now, are you up for it?"

"Alright, but it isn't my fault if I melt a limb off," Jake sighed as he also finally got off the bed and got dressed.

"Eh, I can always get a new one," Carmen shrugged. "By the way, have you learned to pop out new limbs yet? I nearly could before my Runemaiden Ritual, but my body is a bit harder to heal now, mainly because of how damn resistant it is to pretty much all kinds of energies."

"I think I'm pretty close if I use a healing potion," Jake answered. "Though I tend to avoid losing limbs in the first place. Also, can we talk about how little sense it makes that healing a damn hole in my chest seems easier than a severed hand? I know why it works like that with the Soulshape and all, but still, it's weird, right?"

"Weird for sure, and no one else seems to think so," Carmen sighed as the two of them walked outside into the small courtyard.

"Truly indoctrinated by the power of system-fuckery," Jake joined her in sighing. "Now, are you ready to have your arm melted off? I have been meaning to test my newly improved skills with acids using Touch, and this seems like a prime opportunity."

"Give it your worst," Carmen said as they both sat down with their legs crossed as she stretched out her arm.

Jake put both hands around her forearm as he looked at her. "Ready?"

"Already told you," she said unbothered.

"Here we go then," Jake said as he activated the skill.

Runes lit up all over Carmen's body as he did so, and he felt the sheer resistance as his hands began to glow dark green. A crackling sound echoed throughout the courtyard as he saw Carmen grimace, the runes shining brighter and brighter by the second as Jake kept pouring in the energy, her skin turning a shade darker.

Jake felt the resistance grow but after an assuring look from Carmen, he kept going. Her arm was definitely slowly getting affected as the runes absorbed more and more of the deadly energy, but Jake just kept pushing on harder and harder. He kept going for nearly half a minute until suddenly, Jake felt all the resistance disappear as all the runes in her arm fractured.

"Oh shi-" Carmen tried to exclaim but never got further as something that should perhaps have been predictable happened.

Her entire arm exploded, launching Jake and Carmen away from each other, splattering blood all over both of them. Jake even had to react at the very last moment by using Eternal Shadow as bone fragments flew for him, each of them giving off an intense sense of danger as he felt like each of them could have pierced pretty damn deep.

As the dust settled, Jake saw Carmen stand back up, missing her left arm at her shoulder, with cracks forming from her shoulder down her upper body. A bit of poison had even leaked in, but he felt it quickly be consumed as only the runes on her body had been destroyed.

"You okay?" Jake asked as he himself was uninjured after he had his Eternal Shadow take the brunt of the explosion.

"I'm all right," Carmen said, grinning as she looked at her missing left arm. "Get it? All right."

"That joke was bad, and you should feel bad," Jake said, as he nevertheless failed to hold himself back from smiling. "Did you at least learn something useful?"

"Not to let people with glowing hands touch me for too long at a time," Carmen said as she took out a health potion and consumed it as she looked at her right arm. "Wanna try again? I kinda wanna see if I can actively resist it..."

Jake looked at her for a moment incredulously before just shrugging. "Sure, you even got two legs, and I have plenty of mana to spare."

"Glad to see we're on the same page," Carmen smiled, seeming almost excited at the prospect.

Chapter 889: Time To Make History

Spending time with Carmen was always eventful, and Jake thoroughly enjoyed it. Maybe it was because they were very much on the same wavelength, and both had a bit of a screw loose. Then again, which talented individual didn't have a bit of a screw loose? It was pretty much a requirement in Jake's mind.

Carmen was just his type of weird. Both were driven, fighting maniacs and were willing to do dumb shit to try and progress. Their little experiment with infusing her with Touch of the Malefic Viper was a prime example of this. Through their brief experimentation, they discovered that the problem wasn't the amount of energy Jake infused but that Carmen was sitting still while he did it.

If she moved around and punched, the energy would be dispersed faster than even Touch could infuse it. What had happened was simply that the energy piled up too much for no reason. Jake also had to admit that the entire experiment was quite beneficial to him. It was rare he had the chance to use Touch on people without them dying pretty quickly, and especially to use it on someone with such high resistance to the skill.

Overall, it was a great time for them both, even if Carmen ended up losing a few more limbs before they figured stuff out. While she recovered and trained by herself, Jake worked on the Demon Prince ritual, making sure no time was wasted.

Anyway, he and Carmen had spent four good days chilling in the Valhal compound before it was time for Jake to head toward the Demon Prince. He had considered staying a bit longer, but he had gotten quite excited about pulling off the ritual once he had fully formed a plan in his mind. Shit, he had even made a few minor changes to make the ritual suit his particular set of skills better.

When Carmen saw him off, and he left the compound, Olaf was naturally also there, along with a few others who gave him knowing looks. In retrospect, maybe spending all his time alone with Carmen inside her private residence could lead to some unforeseen rumors. Not that it hurt Jake in any way, and

these rumors had been around ever since their meetup on Minaga's City Floor anyway... they weren't exactly wrong either.

"I guess I'll see you back on Earth," Jake said as they stood at the exit of the compound.

"If you remember to show up," Carmen teased him.

"Eh, I'm pretty damn sure someone will remind me if I don't," Jake played along. He had never missed a system event so far... but it had been kind of close a few times, hadn't it?

"Worst case, we'll just handle this Prima Guardian on our own," Carmen said with a shrug. "Shouldn't be that hard, though I do expect our Guardian to probably be the most powerful in the ninety-third universe. At least that's what Valhal's intel indicates with how many Primas we killed."

"Let's hope so! That way, it can put up a good fight," Jake said, looking forward to the fight in... slightly less than two years now.

"For sure," Carmen agreed. "I'll probably be back on Earth before you, so see you there."

"See you," Jake said as he also said his goodbyes to Olaf and those muscly dudes who always accompanied him before he headed off toward the Demon Prince. Even if he was looking forward to this Demon Prince ritual, he was also looking forward to getting back to Earth and seeing how things had changed there.

They had been in Nevermore for just about three years in Realtime with the time dilation, putting the intensity of the dilation at about 16x. It was not extreme but far from insignificant either.

Jake also learned that he had been a bit misinformed regarding some things with Nevermore. Because one thing had kind of bothered him. When he initially heard about Nevermore, he was told that the time dilation would get stronger the more floors one did, but with how everyone seemed to finish so close to one another, he didn't really feel like that was the case.

Well, it turned out that it did exist... it was just really dialed down for those competing on the Leaderboards. So rather than it going from 10x to 25x, the version he had done only went from 14x to 17x or something like that. Jake didn't know for certain, but he had a feeling this had something partly

to do with the upcoming system events and whatnot and to make sure that those who did badly wouldn't end up being late. Either way, for all the other versions of Nevermore, the difference would be way more noticeable,

Either way, as Jake made his way to the Demon Prince's place, he made sure to be seen leaving Valhal's compound. A few teleports later, he was at what looked more like a grand estate rather than a compound. It was just one large building with two smaller ones off to the side, with a tall wall surrounding it all. It somehow looked both more prestigious and less prestigious compared to the Valhal compound, and it definitely gave off a "rich people live here" impression.

Not that Jake should be talking, with his residence at the Order of the Malefic Viper and vast personal wealth.

The residents of this mansion clearly noticed Jake before he even fully arrived, as he saw the Demon Prince walking toward the opening gate as he approached, ready to greet him. The demon looked elated upon seeing Jake, making him guess the demon hadn't necessarily believed he would actually show up.

"Welcome! I must say, I feared for a moment you would be preoccupied with more important matters and be unable to visit," the Demon Prince said with a big smile as he looked at Jake like he was a living, walking treasure.

"I said I would show up, didn't I?" Jake answered in a casual tone. "I'm a man of my word, and having looked over the ritual in detail, I must admit I find it an interesting challenge."

"Nevertheless, I know the Chosen is a busy man," the Demon Prince continued as he motioned for him to follow. "Please, this way. I'm sure you're curious to see the real thing after studying it."

Jake nodded as he followed the Demon Prince into the large mansion... and down into the basement. Yeah, Jake felt like someone was pulling his leg. To have a demonic ritual take place in a large creepy cellar was almost too on the nose, but nope, they were entirely serious. What's more, when he arrived in the main ritual chamber, he saw that everything had been drawn in blood, and the circle was indeed shaped like a pentagon with a pentagram in it.

The pentagon was drawn with equally long lines around the perimeter, with the expected star-shaped symbol formed in the middle by drawing lines between all the different opposing sides. The borders also being well-defined, resulted in a total of eleven areas getting sectioned off.

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Ten of these would house one Demon Lord Heart each, while the Cerulean Devil would stand in the very center. The ritual looked complicated at first glance, but it was a lot simpler than it appeared. Simple didn't mean easy, though. Each of those Demon Lord Hearts contained intense power, and Jake would have to manipulate the energy of ten at once. And that wasn't even close to the hardest part. No, that came when he needed to use this energy.

In the center of the pentagon, the Demon Prince would be the center of the entire ritual and also the one taking the biggest risk by far. Because when Jake gave him the signal, he would remove the crystal from his own forehead, as that gem was what Jake was supposed to infuse with energy. Removing that gem was akin to temporarily severing a part of his soul, and if Jake failed, the outcome wouldn't be good for the Demon Prince.

Ending up with a broken Path that resulted in him never being able to level up again with debilitating soul damage would be him getting lucky. The far more likely outcome was just death. On second thought, maybe death would be the preferable outcome to getting your soul fucked up...

"What do you think about the ritual?" the Cerulean Demon asked. "I worked on a lot of it myself with some of the best experts I could find in the field, and this was the best we could come up with. I will also admit it was made after we became aware of your existence, as you gave me and my clan hope to pull something like this off. The entire concept is based on an old ritual that was attempted a long time ago but has never once succeeded. I hope to make today a first because someone like you has never existed before."

Jake looked at the circle closely, making sure everything matched what the disc had said. It did, and Jake nodded as he looked at the demon, also finally doing a quick Identify.

[Demon – lvl 280]

"This ritual of yours indeed isn't feasible at all," Jake answered, seeing the Demon Prince's smile quickly fade. "For anyone else but me, that is. But you already knew that."

"Yes," the Demon Prince readily admitted. "If rituals like these were possible with our current means, we would be doing them far more often. If we succeed for the very first time, the gains would be unimaginable. Perhaps it's foolish of me, but I'm willing to take this gamble and believe in you. Also, to clarify... my elders are very much against this, which is the primary reason we are doing it here in Nevermore City."

Jake slowly nodded, a few things making more sense now. He also wouldn't want some junior to pull off a massively risky ritual performed by some virtual stranger. It was peak-gambling. The gains if Jake somehow succeeded could be immense, as the demon said, though.

He understood the mentality of the Demon Prince. It reminded Jake a bit of his own. The demon was willing to take massive risks for a small chance to grow stronger, and he was clearly not willing to just be another demon who would become an elite mortal. He was aiming for the peak, even if it killed him, and Jake could respect that. Jake could also respect that the higher-ups among the Demon Prince's clan wouldn't like this, so it was good he had come prepared.

"Speaking of lacking approval from your higher-ups..." Jake said as he waved his hand, and a parchment appeared. A contract.

The Demon Prince quickly scanned it, unsurprised, and nodded. "A contract between two individuals... personal choice... knowledge of risk... karmic separation... this is a liability waiver and an agreement this ritual does not include either faction in any official capacity?"

"That is what I believe it says," Jake responded, having to fully admit he hadn't read the massive contract that thoroughly himself. Seriously, it was so overly long it made no sense it could be on a single piece of paper. However, he had been assured by the Viper this was what he needed, and from what Jake had read, the contract didn't include some joke clause. Because he could totally see the Viper include a joke clause.

"Well, this is also to be expected," the Demon Prince said as he, funnily enough, waved his own hand as a contract appeared. "I will admit mine is a bit less thorough, though. I do not have the authority to declare that should any vengeance be sought due to the outcome of the ritual, the Fourth Hell will officially be declared an enemy of the Order of the Malefic Viper, and the two factions will be at war."

"Gotta be thorough," Jake just smiled.

"Indeed," the Demon Prince said as he made a small cut on his finger and pressed it against Jake's contract. There was no magic mumbo-jumbo or anything, but Jake did feel a tiny bit of energy get infused into the contract. "Now, my excitement and anxiety for what is to come next is beginning to overflow... does the Chosen need any more preparation time? If not, I will go fetch the team."

"Give me an hour," Jake said as he looked at the ritual. "I will need to make some very minor adjustments to prime everything for my arcane affinity. It won't be invasive, more like an extra layer on top that will assist me and keep everything under control more easily."

"You do not have to explain yourself to me," the Demon Prince said. "I'm already leaving my life in your hands, and if you wished me harm, I would have no recourse."

Quite the pressure, Jake mentally joked as he just nodded and got to work on the circle. The Demon Prince left to fetch the others who would assist him, leaving Jake to do his slight modifications. As he told the demon, he didn't need to do much, just add some strings of stable arcane mana here and there that more or less functioned like wires. This was one of the great things about his arcane affinity: he could easily mix it with other stuff without it ever interfering with anything. Meanwhile, with a slight mental command, he could activate the strings and use them to channel energy. He had even done something a bit similar with the Twinhead Emperor ritual, and that had worked out well.

Jake ended up taking a bit over an hour to get everything ready, with the Demon Prince having already returned with ten other demons by the time he was done.

"So these will be the ones assisting me during the ritual?" Jake asked as he went over.

"Indeed. All of them are highly skilled mages and ritualists who I'm sure will be of great help," the Demon Prince said proudly as Jake scanned them.

All the demons assisting him were all between level 275 to 285. Jake's level 275 was actually on the lower end of the scale, but that didn't bother him particularly much. When it came to pure power, these demons were... okay at most. However, he could also feel a severe lack of bloodlust from most of them, making him believe they were all more crafters than fighters.

"Well, It's a pleasure to meet you all," Jake said, as he looked at the ten clearly nervous demons, half of whom seemed to think this entire ritual was a horrible idea but were still going to do it because a Demon Prince ordered it. "Before we begin, I would personally advise you to shake off some of that nervousness. While your roles aren't the hardest, I would be very miffed if one of you ended up fucking shit up for the rest of us."

Jake said the last part in a slightly threatening tone, as he decided also to apply a bit of the carrot. "Meanwhile, if you all help make this a success, you will have been part of a ritual to do something likely never done before, all while working together with the Malefic Viper. Seeing as we're all smart people here, hope I don't have to explain the significance of that. Oh, and dispel all thoughts of this ritual being impossible. It may be to you, but I don't see why that should make it impossible for me. I'm pretty good at doing what others believe impossible."

Were Jake's words extremely arrogant? Yes, definitely. But he also had to make it clear to the group that he was not there just to fuck around. Based on the feeling he got from the ten demons, his words did seem to have some effect. He wasn't wrong either... Jake did have a history of pulling off seemingly impossible feats.

"Alright, get in position, everyone, and make sure you're in peak condition. Let's make history," Jake said encouragingly as everyone did as he said with resolute nods. He also exchanged gazes with the Demon Prince, who smiled and walked by him while patting him on the shoulder.

"Let's make history indeed."

Jake took a deep breath as he was fully mentally prepared for the ritual. Everything was planned out, and surely... surely nothing unforeseen could go wrong when messing with the ancient fragment of a heart full of Records left by a powerful devil of the past, right?

Chapter 890: A Couple Of Major Oversights

This ritual was kind of unique in the sense that Jake didn't really ever do these with the intent of accomplishing something specific. Okay, he knew he wanted the ritual to push some creature toward a more powerful and "primal" Path, but he didn't go in with any knowledge of how exactly that would look. He pretty much just went with the flow and let things play out.

In this ritual, he was trying to amplify a very specific Origin.

The heart fragment, which was the centerpiece of the ritual had belonged to a devil. A demon god. To return that to its Origin would be to return it to something closer to the Cerulean Devil. The Records of a god, especially a seemingly powerful one, would simply overshadow any related just to demons in general or anything like that.

Gazing at the ritual circle – which was more of a ritual pentagon – Jake saw everyone had gotten into position. The Demon Prince had purchased ten Crystalized Demon Lord Hearts from other Nevermore Attendees before he even approached Jake in the first place, and while Jake considered if adding his own would help, he quickly realized it wouldn't. The ritual was made for ten hearts, and Jake also knew numbers could have some weird conceptual significance.

"Everyone, get ready. We begin in sixty seconds," Jake spoke out to the basement as he felt the tension rise. The Demon Prince sat with his legs crossed in the center of the large magic pentagram within the pentagon, and while he put up a good front, Jake saw his nervousness. Again, pretty understandable.

Seconds ticked by as all the demons did their own final preparations. Everyone had a few potions at the ready, and all knew exactly what their roles were. The one doing the vast majority of the work was Jake, and in part, the Demon Prince, who had to endure the process of tearing his soul apart and hopefully reshaping it into something better.

"I leave my life and future in your hands, Chosen of the Malefic One," the Demon Prince sent Jake telepathically as he took a deep breath.

Jake didn't respond directly to him as he stood at the edge of the pentagon. "Ten seconds."

The tension was as high as ever as Jake said some final words of encouragement. "Keep calm, do your jobs, and all will be fine. Seven seconds."

Jake really wanted to say: "You don't have to believe in yourselves; just believe in me, who believes in you," but he had a feeling that would have made them too confused with only a few seconds left before shit went down.

"Five."

Taking a step forward, Jake stood at the control point of the ritual.”

”Four.”

Activating his energy, he linked up with the ritual.

”Three.”

He felt all the hearts and the Demon Prince in the center.”

”Two...”

Closing his eyes, Jake allowed his Perception to fully seep into the entire ritual circle as he raised his hands.

”One...”

Red light filled the entire ritual as Jake poured in his energy, and activated the ritual.

”Start.”

As commanded, the first demon ritualist activated his section of the ritual, making the Crystalized Demon Lord Heart begin to crack and leak energy. Jake instantly took control of this leaked energy and forced it into the formation, storing it within.

With a mental command, he made the second demon also activate her part, as the second heart began to let out energy in a controlled manner. Once more, it was forced into the ritual circle as Jake kept track and made sure it didn’t leave its designated area.

A few minutes later, a third heart was activated. Followed by a fourth a few more minutes later. This kept going as the energy levels of the entire ritual and basement were rising at an alarming speed, as Jake allowed none of the demonic energy to run rampant.

Soon, they reached the eighth heart, which was when Jake gave the Demon Prince his cue. Without even a second of hesitation, the Demon Prince's body lit up with energy as all of the glowing veins on his body activated, and with determination, the gem embedded in his forehead was torn out as it floated upwards, barely connected to the demon through a thin red and blue string.

The lines drawn in the very center around the Demon Prince were also activated, with its function a bit different than anywhere else. It was there to keep him alive long enough for Jake to do his thing, as he was very much under time pressure.

With another command, Jake took hold of the demonic energy as he strained himself. He commanded it to move toward the center of the pentagram and toward the now floating cerulean gem. The gem didn't even resist in the slightest as it greedily began to absorb the energy from all the hearts.

Jake kept everything under control, even as the ninth and tenth hearts were activated. They weren't getting drained fast or slow, and all the demon ritualists kept a steady pace as commanded, slowing down or speeding up whenever Jake told them to.

The Demon Prince was sitting with an empty look in his eyes as blood poured out of his forehead where the gem had been, looking almost catatonic. Yet Jake felt the demon's consciousness still remained strong as the connection between the prince and the gem remained powerful.

So far, so good, Jake reassured himself as things were proceeding as they should. He knew the demons were struggling, but they held on nicely. Jake also knew all of them this was only possible due to his monstrous level of control and Perception, as he made sure everything was as it should be.

Soon, it was time for the next part of the ritual as Jake poured in a bit of his own arcane energy. Not his Jake Juice quite yet, but just what he had initially believed he would be able to do when he originally saw the ritual. The arcane energy mixed with the demonic energy that entered the gem ever-so-slightly, carrying with it nothing more than Jake's intent.

Intent it listened to, as Jake felt something from the cerulean gem. He felt a sense of greed and hunger.

Good... it's there, Jake grinned to himself. The same as how affinities had things they "wanted," many magic items like this also had some very fundamental sense of instinct. This gem naturally wanted to absorb more energy and grow, and now Jake had metaphorically kicked that instinct awake.

Suppressing a groan, Jake felt the gem begin to greedily try and drag the demonic energy out of the ritual circle, but Jake knew he couldn't allow that. If he did, the gem risked exploding, or for the Demon Prince to be overwhelmed. He was already struggling, but Jake had to take his hat off to the Demon Prince. The guy was not considered a peak genius for nothing, as he managed to keep calm and do his part perfectly.

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Minutes passed, as the gem consumed more and more energy, its aura growing in intensity. Soon, the first heart was fully consumed, followed by a second and a third. The hearts were emptied out one after another, crumbling into dust, and soon, the cerulean gem contained not only its own innate energies but the cumulative energy of ten Crystalized Demon Lord Hearts.

If Jake stopped the ritual here, or if someone else had been in charge, all they would have accomplished was to infuse the cerulean gem with a fuckload of demonic energy, resulting in the body of the Demon Prince probably exploding if he tried to fully reabsorb it. He would definitely die, no doubt about it.

Yet the cerulean gem still hungered, and the Demon Prince was struggling more than ever, as all the other demon ritualists could now do nothing more than look on with expectation, fear, and doubt. The ritual so far had all gone as planned, sure. But everything till now had also been the "easy" part that they all knew was theoretically possible.

Now, they were onto the "making history" part as they explored all-new territory.

Jake next did what only he could do as he activated energy from deep within himself. A mere spark, a whisper at most. It traveled through the arcane strings he had laid down before, unaffected by all other energies as strings rose and wrapped around the cerulean gem as the spark of Origin Energy entered it.

Nothing happened for a moment until a deep thrumming noise erupted from the gem, sending out a wave of pure demonic energy that now carried a slightly off-blue color, ripping apart all Jake's arcane threads in the process. A second wave came soon after, as Jake felt the changes with the gem. It began to not just house the energy from the Demon Lord Hearts but entirely devour it to empower itself, turning quantity into quality. All to allow it to return to Origin... and this was when Jake noticed oversight number one with this entire ritual.

It was originally a damn heart.

A heart!

Not a fucking forehead gem.

So when the gem began to slowly warp and change, he felt the fear from the Demon Prince and the horror on the faces of all the demon ritualists. The cerulean gem... which would probably be called the Cerulean Devil Heart by now, grew in size, way too large to be on the forehead of the demon it originally belonged to.

The horror on the faces of the observing demons only grew further in the very next moment when Jake stepped down and teleported forward. Without a shred of hesitation, he grasped the growing gem in his hand, feeling it burn into his skin as he had to fight back the demonic energy. With his other hand, he quickly equipped a katar as he stabbed the Demon Prince in his heart before promptly plunging his hand that was holding the crystal heart inside.

Jake tried to let go and pull his hand back out... but couldn't. He felt as if his hands had merged with the gem-like heart as it began to attempt to pull energy from him. Not just any energy either. It wanted his Origin Energy, and just not a little of it, either.

Yeah, no, Jake quickly cut that off as he resisted. For a moment, he considered just cutting off his own arm, especially when the flesh he had cut open to put his hand in began to close around his forearm due to the damn healing circle below them. However, before he had a chance to cut it off, the heart was complete.

It had needed no more input or guidance from Jake. From the moment he had poured in the Origin Energy, it had known exactly what to do. Now, this is where the second major oversight of this ritual reared its ugly head.

Once the Cerulean Devil Heart was fully formed, it returned to a state of what it once was. It obtained Records of a being that was long dead but was a powerful devil back whenever they lived. Those Records were now everything that remained within the heart... and that wasn't something the Demon Prince could handle.

The thrumming sound echoed out again as Jake finally recognized it as what it was: a heartbeat.

This Cerulean Devil Heart was still connected to the Demon Prince, even after it transformed. It was merged with his soul, through and through. For this ritual, he had temporarily separated it, but now, it had fully become part of him again. This had been what they wanted. The Demon Prince would now merge with the pure Records of the Cerulean Devil Heart. Merge with whatever had come to life within the heart. This part was not what they had wanted.

And, well, this situation reminded Jake a bit of the time he had chosen to also absorb an object containing overwhelming Records of a god. Except that god had still been alive, while this situation was entirely unique and of Jake's making.

As Jake was trying to figure out what the fuck to do, the third oversight made itself known. Somehow, he had become part of his merging process due to him holding the heart, and through that connection, he felt the internal battle within the Soulspace. Usually, this space was an untouchable realm deep within the soul, but in this very moment, Jake was connected to the Demon Prince in a rather unique way. So, he closed his eyes and made a rash decision.

The Cerulean Demon. Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell. These were the titles the demon had made his name, with him primarily known as the Cerulean Demon. He had been privileged and talented enough to choose his own name, to try and communicate he was the second coming of the Cerulean Devil. The former master of the Fourth Hell and one of the most powerful devils the demon race had ever seen. It was viewed as a tragedy when he died a few eras ago while exploring one of the more dangerous World Wonders of the multiverse.

Luckily, they had managed to retrieve his body and completed the ritual to create the fragments from his heart. One of these fragments which the Cerulean Demon had been granted. When he had merged with it and the Legacy of the Cerulean Devil, he had believed himself a genius at the pinnacle of the

multiverse. In some ways, he was. He had proven himself in Nevermore, yet two people still beat him, but he wasn't particularly disappointed. In fact, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had given him hope of truly being the second coming of the Cerulean Devil... and in some ways, hadn't he succeeded? Just not in the way he had hoped.

The cerulean lightning struck him, as the demon was blasted back within his own Soulspace, the pain nearly unimaginable. Rolling on the ground, the demon tried to stabilize as a claw swept up, tearing his body into several pieces.

He reappeared a moment later, a bit further away, as lightning struck down from above, obliterating his entire body in an instant. Right as he appeared again, his head was severed from his body before he was blasted apart once more. He barely had time to collect his thoughts and wonder how foolish his ambitions had truly been.

During the ritual, after the Cerulean Demon had separated the gem from himself, he had gone to his Soulspace to keep everything intact. He had resisted as the energy flooded into him, and in the sky, the energy had gathered around the gemstone floating there, representing the fragment in the real world.

The energy levels had spiked so high the Demon Prince had been certain it would explode and shatter his entire soul and body... but then something had appeared. He couldn't remember what it looked like, but something had entered the gem... and then it began evolving. It grew, pulsed, began to beat like a true heart, and the Demon Prince was elated, especially when he felt his connection to it strengthen more than ever before as it fully merged back into him. He was happy and, for a moment, even believed they had truly succeeded.

Until the heart didn't stop growing.

From the heart grew a torso, legs, arms, and a head before an entire creature appeared. For a moment, the Demon Prince believed the Cerulean Devil had come back to life, as this demonic creature looked just like the paintings he had seen. The same blue leathery skin, four horns, clawed hands, and powerful physique. Yet the eyes were different. Empty. When the Demon Prince saw those eyes, he knew that this was but an empty husk... a husk that still possessed the overwhelming Records of the Cerulean Devil.

A husk that was currently destroying him.

The Demon Prince tried to fight back, but he didn't stand a chance. He was powerful within his own Soulspace, for sure. His Records allowed him to display power far beyond what he could in the real world, yet before this Cerulean Devil husk, he was nothing but a plaything to be repeatedly destroyed as the creature learned about itself. Like a curious and destructive child, it tried to kill him in all the ways it could as the Demon Prince felt himself weaken. Felt himself dying as he feared what would come next.

His soul would die, and this creature would overwhelm his own Records. It would replace him and evolve into something truly monstrous. He just hoped that even if it was powerful, the Chosen of the Malefic One and the others could handle this creature... but he feared what it would evolve him into wouldn't still be a C-grade.

Foolish. He and this creature were both foolish. It would likely become an A- or S-grade that would never be able to level again and be naught but a being of destruction. A short-lived Path, as they were within Nevermore City, and some powerful being would snuff it out instantly. The expected outcome of a creature with no sapience running wild.

Meanwhile, the Demon Prince's own hubris had led to his. He had believed himself far more capable than he truly was, and now he couldn't even struggle anymore.

His body got destroyed within the Soulspace over and over again, as he began to reappear slower and slower with every death. At the same time, the Cerulean Devil husk only grew in power. The end was near, and struggle was meaningless, as-

"Oi," a voice suddenly cut through the Soulspace. "The fuck you think you're doing?"