

## Hunter 891

### Chapter 891: Demonic Soulspace Adventure: Cerulean Devil Edition

The creature stopped attacking just as the Demon Prince reanimated again, his form semi-transparent due to the significant soul damage he had taken. He looked over in horror and saw the Cerulean Devil stare directly at the newcomer who had entered his Soulspace. Stare directly at the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

"Get out of here!" the Demon Prince yelled with all his remaining energy. He quickly understood what had happened. The Chosen had somehow projected his very own soul into the prince's, and should he die here, the Chosen risked potentially even dying himself, or at the very least, taking severe soul damage. That couldn't happen. "You can still escape! Go!"

However... his warning was too late. As the final words had barely left him, the creature disappeared, only to appear right behind the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

"Oh," the Chosen said as he slowly turned and looked at the creature more closely as he tapped its forehead with a finger. "Pretty empty in there, huh? All instinct."

The Demon Prince just stared, confused. The creature had appeared behind the Chosen, raised a claw, and then stopped. It looked as if it was... shaking. However, its eyes soon regained their fervor as it roared loudly, nearly dispersing the prince's body. Its claw swung down, and-

An arm flew into the air as the Chosen now stood with a hand raised. The creature roared again as a palm smashed into its face, pushing it to the ground making the entire Soulspace shudder from the impact. Without the Demon Prince even knowing how it happened, three more limbs flew into the air as he saw the Chosen stand with a foot on the chest of the Cerulean Devil's husk.

A pillar of cerulean lightning descended as the Demon Prince was blown even further away. He felt the pain in his chest as he saw the ground had been split apart and a large crater formed where the bolt had struck. Quickly, he spotted the Cerulean Devil as it teleported a good distance away, its limbs already fully regenerated. Moreover... it was still growing stronger.

"Feisty," the voice of the Chosen once more echoed as the man walked out of the crater with calm steps, not a single mark on his body. He then suddenly turned and looked toward the Demon Prince. "Things didn't quite go as planned, huh?"

The demon just stared as the Cerulean Devil teleported closer to attack again... only to get blasted into the air by an unseen explosion, the Demon Prince not at all comprehending what was going on. What... is happening?

Jake gave the Demon Prince another look after gently pushing the odd devil creature away, but he still didn't get any answer. He began to fear he had been too slow in entering the Soulspace of the demon and that the prince had taken too much damage before his arrival. But the fact he had yelled out with warning indicated he wasn't in that horrible of a state.

"Are you okay?" Jake asked again. "Any permanent damage?"

Finally, the demon seemed to regain some semblance of calm. "I am fine for now... but that isn't important. The Cerulean Devil is-"

"Annoying," Jake cut him off as the creature appeared once more, forcing Jake to slap it into the horizon once more to give him some more time to talk. He also couldn't help but get a look around, as this was the first Soulspace he had ever seen belonging to another person, and he knew this was an incredibly rare opportunity.

The Soulspace was the representation of the Truesoul every living being had within themselves. Jake's was a massive area filled mostly with barren land and plains with barely any grass on them. The demon's Soulspace honestly wasn't that much different, with the ground just a bit more barren, and the arcane energies filling the sky in Jake's Soulspace had been replaced with rumbling blueish thunderclouds. Well, he also didn't have a shadowy version chilling there or a drop of blood from a Primordial, but those were more bonus assets in Jake's mind. Not like Jake had a rampaging blue devil husk in his, either.

"How are you-" the Demon Prince began as Jake cut him off again.

"Doesn't matter right now. What matters is finishing this ritual," Jake said as the Cerulean Devil attacked again. Jake dodged a few times before kicking the creature away for yet another time. It was a bit annoying, but he had to hold back. He had felt some energy be consumed when he severed the limbs earlier, and he didn't want to waste anything if he could avoid it.

"What do you mean?" the demon asked. "This... this is the finished ritual."

"Alright, then we need to finish the post-ritual issues we are now facing," Jake sighed, noticing the Cerulean Devil was a bit slower at attacking this time. Probably for the best, as he really didn't want to fight that creature. There was no meaning in doing so.

Jake knew he could kill the Cerulean Devil if he wanted, but he also knew what that would mean. It would destroy the newly formed heart he had implanted in the Demon Prince, resulting in all their efforts getting wasted and the Demon Prince getting crippled, as he would lose a part of himself.

If he let it be, the Demon Prince would die, and the creature he was fighting would manifest in the real world, which definitely wouldn't be good. Simply locking down the Cerulean Devil by sealing it in an arcane barrier also wouldn't work. Jake knew instinctively that the moment he left the Soulspace, his energies would leave with him. They had to, or a part of Jake would be forever embedded in the Soulspace of the Demon Prince, which would hurt him immensely.

No... Jake needed to do something else. The easiest solution would be for the Demon Prince to just kill the Cerulean Devil, but that definitely wasn't going to happen. The thing was pretty damn strong. Jake wasn't sure one could really equate the power of creatures within a Soulspace to grades in the real world, but this one would definitely be high. For context, it was stronger than the cursed chimera when Jake first got it.

After the curse had merged with Sim-Jake, things had become a bit complicated, but that was neither here nor there.

"Does the Chosen have a plan?" the Demon Prince asked as he quickly arrived next to Jake. "The creature manifested from the Records of the Cerulean Devil is way beyond my expectations and not something I can deal with."

"I'm well aware of that," Jake muttered as he considered his options. In the real world, he saw himself still standing there with a hand around the heart, and the many demon ritualists around himself and the Demon Prince, none of them doing anything. They all knew trying to interfere wouldn't do them any good. Jake also knew that with a single thought, he could exit the Soulspace, closing the opening he had entered through in the process and leaving the demon to his doom. This was probably the safest choice... but Jake really hated losing, and failing this ritual would definitely count as a loss.

As he was still considering ideas, the Cerulean Devil attacked again, this time having changed up its goal. Rather than target Jake, it went for the Demon Prince to snuff him out once and for all. Too bad for it; Jake was standing right next to him.

An arcane barrier sprung up, blocking the attack of the devil, as an explosion of electricity covered the Soulspace. Jake didn't even feel it tickle him as he raised both his hands and motioned. A bit of mana appeared as six barriers sprung up around the Cerulean Devil before Jake pressed them together, sealing the creature within a cube.

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Using my energies is pretty fucking hard, Jake noticed, as the Cerulean Devil struggled to break free. Moreover, he felt his arcane energy naturally disperse at an alarming rate, even though it was the stable variant. It simply didn't belong in the Soulspace and was naturally being destroyed by the entire space. Jake himself was also a target for constant destruction. He just didn't really notice it.

Slamming against the barriers, the Cerulean Devil began to slowly break out as cracks formed. Jake looked on, thinking hard as he remembered something. He remembered Sim-Jake and what he had done during his stay in Jake's Soulspace. He also remembered something else from his many conversations about devils and demons.

Turning to the Demon Prince, he didn't beat around the bush. "Are you willing to take a massive risk?"

"What do you require me to do?" the demon asked, clearly determined to do whatever Jake asked of him.

"Nothing, things just might not turn out how I hope," Jake responded.

"I already left my life in your hands. I will trust you till the very end."

"You're really piling on the pressure," Jake smirked. "But alright... begin operation absolute submission."

Jake stepped down as he appeared right in front of his own barrier. His hand shot forward, shattering the arcane energy like glass as he grasped the neck of the Cerulean Devil. Before it could even do anything, he threw it down into the ground, creating yet another crater.

A storm of lightning descended, but Jake raised a hand and snapped, dispelling all the lightning halfway descended as he stared down at the devil. "Pathetic."

The creature didn't understand his words but seemed to comprehend his intent somewhat as it roared in anger. Rather than attack Jake, it flew straight for the demon prince, but before it could even move more than a few meters, it was yanked back as Jake grabbed the devil's ankle.

"We're not done," Jake muttered as he slammed the devil into the ground again. It got up instantly, only for Jake to stomp it in the face, embedding its head in the ground again. Struggling, the devil tried to attack with its claws but found itself unable to even pierce Jake's skin.

Jake quickly took hold of one of its wrists, as he tossed the devil away yet another time before teleporting over and catching the creature, only to slam it into the ground again. None of what Jake was doing actually hurt the devil as Jake didn't put much power in... but what he did do was make the devil feel utterly powerless.

He knew this devil wasn't a real creature. It didn't have a soul or any kind of real consciousness. It was just a bundle of Records, acting on instinct to come alive. Like the nascent energies of an elemental forming, fighting the environment to become a living being. All it knew was that it had to kill the Demon Prince, and it would live.

It couldn't really learn as it couldn't think. Not truly. But it could ever-so-slowly adapt, which had been shown by the creature kind of learning how to move and control itself. Perhaps it would awaken a true consciousness one day, but only at the cost of the Demon Prince's death.

In summary, it was a being that had only one goal: survival. Right now, survival meant consuming the Demon Prince and taking over his body. Jake was going to show the Cerulean Devil that was no longer an option. He would show it that it only had one option if it wanted to live in any way.

Minutes passed as Jake threw the Cerulean Devil around. It fought back in the beginning, but soon, it only tried to defend itself. This self-defense slowly morphed into the Cerulean Devil barely trying, as it instead tried to do the only thing it could to survive:

Run.

However, even that was no option. Jake allowed it no escape as he kept beating it down over and over again. In the meantime, he also began to leak out tiny bits of his own aura, frightening the Cerulean Devil further.

When he thought it was about time, Jake looked over at the Demon Prince, who stared, shocked at everything that was happening, as he sent a simple mental message. "Offer the Cerulean Devil a contract to submit and live."

For a few moments, the Demon Prince looked at him confused until his eyes suddenly lit up with clarity as he understood. Jake wouldn't even have considered this an option under usual circumstances, but he was dealing with demons right now.

They were creatures of contracts. Deals. Agreements. Even if the Cerulean Devil was only a husk, it was still bound by its Records as a devil, and once it agreed to a contract, it would be binding. As for its ability to even agree, Jake also knew there would be no problems there. Every creature innately understood contracts created through the system. Perhaps they did not understand its intricacies, but they could instinctively comprehend the intent. Naturally, the Cerulean Devil's instincts would never allow it to submit to the weaker Demon Prince... unless it viewed it as the only way to survive.

Jake upped the pressure as he saw the Demon Prince prepare. Rather than simply smashing the devil around, he fully restrained it as he wrapped it up in arcane strings, conveniently allowing it to still move one of its arms a little.

"Enough... it's time to end this," Jake said, seeing the Demon Prince approach with the contract. He had been hesitant to do this but decided it was time, as for the first time, he fully unleashed his presence and let loose, as he activated maximum intimidation mode.

The Demon Prince wasn't sure something like this would work as he quickly spun up a contract of absolute submission. He approached the devil who had just been bound by strings, a floating contract in front of him.

Even if the devil feared death... submitting and becoming part of the Demon Prince was practically akin to its death. Something truly extraordinary had to pressure it into fully submitting. As he was connected to the Cerulean Devil, he knew it was not at all ready to give up yet. Still, he chose to believe in the Chosen as he got within range of the Cerulean Devil, who looked ready to tear the contract apart... as everything stopped.

And then, it descended. An aura unlike any he had ever experienced before overtook his entire Soul space as it crushed everything beneath it. All emotions were replaced with fear, as the Demon Prince could barely look over the Chosen of the Malefic Viper looking much bigger than he truly was.

In the sky, the clouds scattered as an orangeish glow fell over the Soul space. Looking up, the Demon Prince saw two massive irises stare down at him as he had never felt smaller or more insignificant... and then he felt a slight tap on the contract, as the Cerulean Devil had placed its palm on it.

Just like that, the eyes disappeared, the pressure was gone, and everything returned to normal as the Chosen spoke casually. "Well, that ended up working out somehow. See you on the other side."

And with that, he was gone, leaving only a frozen Demon Prince and Cerulean Devil behind.

Jake opened his eyes in the outside world as he disconnected from the Demon Prince's Soul space, and he felt the slight gap he had entered through close for good. The heart he was grasping in his hand no longer had the same suction force, so he let go and instantly pulled out his hand as he jumped back, blood splattering out, but the healing circle was still active, rapidly mending the wound. Not that Jake believed that was necessary.

"Lord Chosen, what-" one of the ritualists began as Jake cut him off.

"Just wait for it," Jake said with a smile, and as if on cue, a shockwave of energy erupted from the Demon Prince's body as he was enveloped in light. Within this light that Jake could only look inside using his Sphere of Perception, he saw the Demon Prince disappear for a few moments before he reappeared again shortly after, now a changed demon.

The light faded to reveal his form as he stood there with his eyes closed. The forehead gem was gone, and his body had grown a bit in bulk, but the most notable difference was the head. Ten horns circled his skull, each of them pointing toward the ceiling, making it nearly look like he was wearing a crown and definitely making helmets extremely difficult to wear.

Using identify, Jake smiled.

[Cerulean Demon Lord – lvl 280]

He felt the nervous demon ritualists all around, staring with apprehension. Jake also looked at the newly born Cerulean Demon Lord as he asked a pretty important question: "Are congratulations in order, or did we just birth some mindless beast?"

Finally, the Demon Lord opened his eyes as he breathed out, and threw a look at Jake that contained an odd mix of gratitude, respect, and fear. Yet he remained polite. "Thank you... I am still getting used to things."

Jake nodded as he felt the aura of the Demon Prince. It didn't really necessarily feel that much more powerful than before. Only by a little. Which perhaps shouldn't surprise Jake, as the Demon Prince had come third on the Era's Leaderboards, only behind himself and El'Hakan. It wouldn't have made much sense if he had somehow jumped up in power from this ritual, as he was already close to how powerful one could be for his level. It wasn't like Jake had just given him a bunch of stat-increasing titles.

However, he had definitely changed. His Path had evolved, and his future prospects were now far brighter than they were before.

Then, a bit late in Jake's opinion, the pentagon pentagram finally broke fully apart, marking the end of the ritual for good. With it naturally came the sweet system notifications of levels gained.

## Chapter 892: Time To Head Home

Vilastromoz had a lot of thoughts bouncing around in his head after the mysteriousness around the First Sage was seemingly only growing exponentially. However, he could always trust Jake to offer him a good distraction, as he was sitting on the terrace in Nevermore City with his avatar, very much enjoying the show.

He had kept an eye on the entire ritual, as quite frankly, he viewed the Demon Prince and everyone involved with creating that ritual as complete morons. From their conversations, they had clearly believed they were the first ones ever to think up such a daring ritual and viewed themselves as truly innovative and bold.

To the Viper, this wasn't even among the first hundred rituals he had observed like that, each of them practically identical in nature. It wasn't complicated at all what they were doing; it was just stupid. Most



rituals like this ended with the entire thing just blowing up, while the other half ended a bit similarly to how this one nearly did: with the demon in the center mutating into something unintended.

This ritual was different, though. Not in its design but in that it had Jake in charge. His application of the special energy he possessed led to the creation of a far more powerful catalyst for evolution, but that didn't solve the issue of that evolution not ending well for the Demon Prince. Honestly, the entire thought process behind what the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell wanted to accomplish was flawed.

The entire point was for him to improve his Records, and to do that, he would have to absorb an item with superior Records. However, for him to consume an item with superior Records, he needed to have powerful enough Records to begin with. It was quite the conundrum, and to put it in the simplest term possible, the Demon Prince had tried to swallow something too big for him to handle. Mortals simply weren't meant to handle the Records of a god, period.

Vilastromoz was also certain the higher-ups of the Fourth Hell knew this. Shit, the Viper himself had seen recordings of their own failed rituals in the past, so they knew this wasn't going to work. Yet they had allowed the Demon Prince to go ahead, even after he had proven himself on the Leaderboards. Did they do so to use him as a political tool? If the Viper's Chosen messed up and got one of their young talents killed, they likely wouldn't demand compensation, but they could try to leverage it to request help from Jake or perhaps even the Viper himself in the future.

It was naturally also possible they simply wanted to take the gamble and see if maybe the Harbinger of Primeval Origins could do what was thought impossible. To lose a Demon Prince to figure this out wasn't that big of a price to pay. They could always nurture many more. Meanwhile, the possibilities if Jake was successful were nearly limitless and something even the devils of the Hells would care about.

This was the reality they now found themselves with. Jake had succeeded... no, he had gone beyond expectations and done something that the Viper honestly hadn't been a fan of, even if things had worked out.

"Did your Chosen just astral-project his own soul into the Soulspace of another?" the Wyrmgod suddenly asked as the Primordial appeared on the terrace.

"And here I thought you respected the rights to private property. Not to mention your illegal spying on residents... do we have a public relations disaster on our hands here?" the Viper asked teasingly.

"Nevermore City is still partly considered Nevermore and thus my domain," the Wyrmgod answered. "And even if I observed the situation, due to its peculiar nature, I still remain with questions. Did your Chosen truly astrally project into another Soulspace?"

"He sure did," the Viper shrugged. "Mind you, this is after I told him not to astrally project his soul around like that way back in the Tutorial."

"Foolish and reckless," the Wyrmgod said before he frowned. "Wait, he astrally projected during the Tutorial? Where to?"

"To the Order of the Malefic Viper, using his connection to me as my Chosen," the Viper said casually. "I did send him back pretty quickly, though."

"That is... hm..." the other Primordial said as he appeared to be deep in thought.

Jake doing these things was impressive, but neither was considered impossible. Astral projection was a pretty normal ability, and Jake's version was quite frankly shit. It was the riskiest version there was and one no one ever really used unless they didn't know better. Projecting at such an early grade did indicate an extremely powerful and stable soul, though.

As for entering the Soulspace of another, that was not something considered impossible either, just incredibly rare, and not something people often did or wanted to do. Very specific circumstances had to present themselves to make it possible. There were also certain skills that could make one interact with the Soulspace, though.

The Minotaur Mindchief Jake encountered all the way back in E-grade was a creature that could touch upon the soul. The skill that D-grade had wasn't quite capable of entering a Soulspace, but with a skill evolution or two, perhaps it would be possible. The thing is, more often than not, there were no benefits to entering a Soulspace, only demerits.

Anyone would be stronger inside their own Soulspace than in the real world. The Soulspace was a representation of your Records and allowed you to have power not based on how strong you were but how strong you could become. It was a simplification, but that was roughly how it worked.

With how Records functioned, outside of extraordinary cases, everyone would have more Records than their actual power presented. The only ones who didn't were those who had reached the end of their potential, and even they always had a bit more potential to pull on and would be at a significant advantage within their own Soulspace.

This was due to the second reason why it was stupid to enter someone else's Soulspace: the suppression. A Soulspace was one's domain, and anything foreign that did not belong there would be suppressed and pushed out or destroyed. So even if two people were equally powerful, if the fight suddenly switched to a Soulspace of either of them, that person would have an insurmountable homefield advantage and easily destroy their opponent.

The Soulspace could most easily be likened to the divine realm of a god. It was the domain of the person it belonged to, and within it, they would be far more powerful while everyone would be suppressed. So, for the same reasons as why one wouldn't ever want to enter another's divine realms, neither should one enter other Soulspaces.

That is... unless one was so powerful, any such suppression in other domains proved meaningless. This was what Jake had effectively done. His soul was simply at another level, and even if he astrally projected into another Soulspace, he didn't really care about anything and did whatever he did in there.

The reason it was still risky, though, was that if the Demon Prince had died, Jake would have lost whatever he astrally projected for good. Which definitely wouldn't have been good,

"His soul is truly not normal, is it?" the Wyrmgod questioned after a good while.

"Nope," the Viper smiled.

"Do you expect the Hells to begin making their move soon? I know the Order has maintained a strong working relationship with them, even in your absence," the Primordial continued. "We both know that his accomplishment is related to his Bloodline, and the Demon Prince will surely return to the Fourth Hell and report everything that happened in detail."

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"Oh, without a doubt, they'll do something fun," Vilastromoz shook his head. "They owe Jake now, especially the Demon Prince, whom I'm sure will be given quite a lot of attention going forward."

"They will undoubtedly want to propagate his Lineage," the Wyrmgod agreed. "I am also thinking... has your Chosen considered what the impact of what he has just done will be?"

"Not at all," Vilastromoz said with certainty as he grinned.

"I see. Either way, I am still interested at some point in the future when he has matured more into his powers," the Wyrmgod said as he turned to leave. "Before, I was unsure if he would even be open to the suggestion, but now that he's opened that door himself, my doubt has lessened significantly."

The Wyrmgod disappeared as Vilastromoz shook his head. Jake indeed didn't know the impact of what he had done. No, not the achievement itself or anything related to it. It was the mere fact he had even agreed to the ritual in the first place.

Before this, he had only ever done rituals for himself. Even if it ended up benefitting some factions, he hadn't been asked by them to do it. This time, he had effectively done a commission using his abilities as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins. He had shown the multiverse that was even a possibility he considered, which also communicated he could use the ability purposefully, with its limitations perhaps not as severe as first hinted at.

In summary, Jake had sent a message to all the major factions of the multiverse despite not knowing he had done so. Or maybe Jake did and the Viper had underestimated his Chosen and the hunter's ability to understand the multiverse's political landscape.

Jake had naturally not thought about this at all. He had just seen a really interesting and cool ritual and agreed to do it, never considering the wider implications of his actions. But was that really his fault? It was just everyone else reading too much into things and making them way more complicated than they had to be.

Still standing in the ritual chamber, he waited patiently as the newly born Cerulean Demon Lord regained his bearings. Jake could understand why it would take a while. He probably had a lot of system notifications to deal with, so Jake also took the chance to check out those he had gotten himself.

Firstly, there was an interesting one, as he wasn't sure he had ever gotten an "experience gained" message that looked like that before.

You have successfully conducted a ritual leading to the creation of a Cerulean Demon Lord – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

He had other notifications that talked about rituals, but not in this fashion. It was mainly the conducting part... probably because this was Jake's first group ritual where he had been in charge. Something he had feared would hurt his experience gain, but seeing the next few messages, that didn't appear to be the case.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 263 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 267 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

Five whole levels for a ritual that only took a couple of hours. That was damn efficient leveling, if Jake said so himself, and it put him even closer to level 300, which was the next milestone he really looked forward to, as that would mean meeting the First Sage directly.

He had naturally also gained a few race levels with the profession ones.

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 276 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 278 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

All in all, it had been quite a fruitful endeavor, and even if he had to spend a bit of his special Jake Juice, it was such a tiny amount that the levels he had just gained nearly made up for it. He almost wanted to see if he could do another ritual sometime soon, but he also got the feeling that wouldn't be smart. Not like it would reward even close to the same amount of levels, due to the uniqueness of this one. He also wasn't sure where to find ten legendary Demon Lord Hearts.

"My lord?" one of the demon ritualists asked after a while. The Demon Prince took a moment to respond as he opened his eyes again and rolled his shoulders. Rather than respond to the demon, he looked at Jake instead.

"My apologies. There are a lot of things to take in, and the metaphysical representation of the Cerulean Devil still remains within my Soulspace. It will take a while to fully absorb but with the contract in place..." the demon said as he looked deep in thought.

"I would reckon you got a pretty smooth ride for the next evolution or two," Jake shrugged with a smile. He would be like Jake and Sylphie in that he didn't have things like race quests but would just be able to evolve as long as his class allowed it.

"That is likely," the newly-born Demon Lord agreed as he volunteered some information. "My racial skills have mostly all changed, but my class remains the same. One thing is clear, though: I am a fully-fledged Demon Lord now. With all the perks and downsides, there comes with that."

"Is that a good or a bad thing?" Jake questioned.

The Demon Prince just smiled. "Think of Demon Lords as being to demons what a True Royal is to an ectognamorph, albeit in an admittedly far less extreme fashion. It's viewed as a higher race of sorts, though it does also come with a certain set of expectations."

"So, it's overall good, got it," Jake nodded.

"Good indeed," the Demon Prince shook his head with a smile as he looked at Jake seriously. "You have given me a boon I have no idea how to ever make up for. No, not just me; the entire Fourth Hell owes you. It may be late to ask, but what does the Chosen desire? I realize we failed to ever discuss payment for your work."

"Hm," Jake said, having totally not forgotten he should probably get paid. "How about this... you owe me one."

Jake truly didn't need anything. However, a favor could hold a lot of value in the future, especially if the Cerulean Demon Lord rose to power as one would expect of him. One had to remember he was in third place on the Era Leaderboards, and that was before his evolution. Now, Jake didn't doubt he would have done even better, though it was doubtful he would have beaten Ell'Hakan, much less Jake.

"Owing you is but a given," the Demon Lord shook his head as he considered for a moment before taking out an odd emblem of sorts. When he did so, Jake saw the alarm on the faces of the ritualists, but none of them said anything. "For now, take this."

"What is it?" Jake questioned before he accepted it.

"The crest of my clan. With it, you will be treated like an honored guest in at least the first four Hells. Moreover, if you ever find anything you desire from us, feel free to use it and contact us, and I swear on my Path that I shall do my utmost to assist you," the Cerulean Demon Lord explained.

"I see," Jake said as he chose to accept the crest as he got an idea. "I may not find a need myself, but if I have a comrade who can benefit, would I be allowed to give it to them instead?"

"What you use it for will be to your sole discretion," the Demon Lord just said. "I am well aware that chances are we have nothing to offer that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper cannot obtain himself, outside of particular things unique to the Hells or items that could only benefit demons."

"In that case, I may just find a use for it," Jake nodded. Yeah, chances are, he was just going to hand it off to Irin or something. As the Demon Prince had said, Jake didn't really need anything they could offer, and even the unique alchemical ingredients the demons had a monopoly on, he could still just buy as part of the Order if push came to shove.

"Anyway, it was a pleasure doing this ritual with you all, even if things didn't exactly go to plan," Jake said after they exchanged a few more pleasantries. "Good job, everyone. I told you we would make history."

It seemed as if it was only when Jake said this that the ten demon ritualists who had assisted with the ritual truly realized what they had been a part of. Only now did they realize they had indeed been part of a ritual that may have been entirely one-of-a-kind and would truly go down in the history of the multiverse. It was no understatement to say that the Cerulean Demon Lord was not the only one who had their entire future changed on this day.

Jake didn't say anything more as he allowed everything to sink in, and he exited the basement, the Demon Prince escorting him out. He didn't lead Jake out of the mansion itself, as he wanted to remain hidden for now, something Jake understood. The Demon Prince had changed quite a lot physically, going from being just about Jake's height to now being two full heads taller, and that wasn't even counting the horns. He looked a lot more like the Cerulean Devil, that was for sure. Especially the part where he had turned way more blue.

Walking out of the demon mansion, Jake felt pretty happy about how things had gone as he considered where to go next. That was when he realized this had been the last item on his Nevermore City bucket list... which meant there was really only one more thing left to do.

It's time to head home.

#### Chapter 893: Post-Nevermore Status

Leaving Nevermore felt oddly weird. Probably because he had spent fifty years of his life within the World Wonder. He had met many interesting figures, learned a lot about the multiverse, and bonded a lot with his party members. At least he felt a lot closer to the Sword Saint and Fallen King now than before. Rather than simply be comrades of convenience, he would say they could actually be considered friends now.

Dina was also someone Jake now considered a friend, and he knew she felt the same way, even if she was still a bit reserved. Of course, Jake couldn't compare to Sylphie when it came to making friends, as he was pretty sure all three of his other party members would gladly cause a war for her. Not to say Jake wouldn't also do that...

Anyway, the point was Jake had made a lot of memories and bonds. Of course, Nevermore had also brought with it one other quite important thing. The primary reason he and nearly anyone else even went to Nevermore in the first place was its status as potentially the best place to level in the entire multiverse, and that was showing.

Fifty years was a long time, but Jake definitely wouldn't say that time had at all been wasted, and when he did something he hadn't for a while, it really made it obvious.



He pulled up his full status, tweaked things a bit, and compared it to before he had entered Nevermore.

## Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – 204 --> 278]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – 203 --> 289]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – 206 --> 267]

Health Points (HP): 182,060/182,060

Mana Points (MP): 401,321/411,484

Stamina: 205,651/212,790

## Stats

Strength: 8536 --> 26170

Agility: 12496 --> 34616

Endurance: 8911 --> 21279

Vitality: 8834 --> 18206

Toughness: 7389 --> 14488

Wisdom: 11181 --> 26335

Intelligence: 9276 --> 22425

Perception: 23246 --> 54595

Willpower: 9385 --> 23267

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer XV], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Marquess], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths], [Mythical Prodigy], [Perfect Evolution (C-grade)], [Nevermore Challenger All-star], [Peerless Conquerer of Nevermore]

Class Skills: [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Bestial Hunter's Tracking (Epic)], [Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Ancient)], [Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)], [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Horizon-chasing Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)], [Mark of the Horizon-Chasing Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)], [Unseen Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter (Mythical)], [Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Mythical)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Brew Potion (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Rare)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)], [Arcane Curse Manifestation (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper

(Legendary)), [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)], [Core Manipulation of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Chosen's Offering of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Identify (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

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As always, the entire status was long as hell. Alas, there were a lot of things to go through.

He hadn't actually gained that many skills during his time in Nevermore, but he had upgraded a few. The real standouts were definitely Unseen Hunter, Protean Arrow, and, naturally, Primal Gaze. The upgrade to his Hunter's Mark was also great, though that one had been a bit forced by the story page book.

When talking about new skills, Penetrating Arcane Arrow upped his overall damage output a lot, especially in combination with Protean Arrow. Out of every single skill he had upgraded or gained throughout Nevermore, the most impactful had to be the one he had obtained at level 230, though:

Arcane Supremacy.

It was the type of skill that worked in the background but offered incredible effects, making Jake far stronger in every aspect. It increased his overall damage and speed regarding everything arcane-related when in combat, and with his body even more attuned to arcane energy than before, he could keep his boosting skill active for far longer or charge Arcane Powershot more before his body gave out. To summarize, it was a force-amplifier of significant proportion.

Of course, skills were far from the only thing Jake had gained in Nevermore. No, the true growth was definitely to be seen in the stats department.

When he compared the stats of Jake before Nevermore and Jake after, the difference was stark, especially the extreme growth seen in his Strength, Agility, and, of course, Perception stats.

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Early on, he had decided to put all his Free Points into Strength and Agility, doing a roughly equal split between the two, with a bit more going into Agility over Strength. He had kept this going throughout the World Wonder for the most part, which had led to the two of them increasing so much.

Perception had comparatively fallen a bit behind, but Jake had at least tried to keep it up there, and it was the stat that had the biggest raw increase by quite a margin. He had primarily boosted his stat gain by licking the wonderful Void Marble he had been gifted by Oras, keeping his potential stats from items maxed out at all times. It had been a bit funny that Jake had crafted so many elixirs not to drink a single one himself, but hey, his party had demanded it, and who was he to deny Sylphie a tasty snack?

Anyway... Nevermore had taken Jake from barely in C-grade to now solidly in mid-tier C-grade, a bit over halfway to his next evolution. He had gone from being able to fight weaker variants in mid-tier C-grade to now feeling confident facing late-tier C-grades even if they were considered high-tier variants. Especially after the title he had gained from completing Nevermore atop the All-Time Leaderboards, he felt confident.

It wouldn't be that long before Jake would be able to kill a weak B-grade. He wasn't quite there yet, but he was getting close. He did reckon that finding worthy opponents in mid-tier C-grade would be borderline impossible, though, unless they were peak geniuses like himself, and even then, he wouldn't back down.

All in all... Nevermore took a long time, but it was more than worth it, Jake once more concluded as he quickly arrived at the Order compound in Nevermore City. There was more activity than usual due to all the visitors wanting to make friends with the Order after Jake's performance, but Jake didn't want to get involved in any of that.

Through his Sphere, he did see Viridia busily talking with a group of important-looking people, making him not want to disturb her. So, he just headed straight for a teleporter placed within the heart of the compound. It was one powered by Nevermore itself, allowing anyone to easily travel between universes to set destinations. It could even pierce through most protections against teleportation, making it possible to go straight into the home bases of all the different factions. Jake knew a lot of thought went

into who had these teleporters and who could use them, but he didn't really care much as he approached the teleportation room.

Two guards stood outside, and merely bowed as they saw Jake enter. Walking up to the small stone platform with the teleportation circle on it, Jake stopped and smiled.

"You heading back with me?" he asked as he turned and looked at the snake god that had appeared.

"Might as well, no reason to keep this avatar here after you leave," Villy shrugged. "All it could lead to was someone finding out it was there, and I risk someone wanting to meet me if that happens."

"Perfectly understandable," Jake nodded. Being forced to meet with people was indeed horrible.

"Before we leave... I had a run-in with Eversmile. Talked about those boots of yours and how interesting he found them. Also talked about meeting with you," the Viper said.

"Yeah, he approached me during the forced get-together. Said that he'd go talk to you, so I didn't think to mention it," Jake shrugged. "Or maybe I wanted to let it be a surprise. I can be unpredictable like that. Also, not gonna lie; Eversmile seriously freaks me out. I prefer to avoid thinking and talking about him."

"That's fair; he is an acquired taste for sure," Villy nodded. "He was very interested in the First Sage."

The god gave Jake a weird look as he mentioned the First Sage, but Jake just wrote that up to the Viper, still feeling weird in general about his first and only master.

"Can't fault him for feeling interested in that guy; the First Sage is pretty damn intriguing," Jake said with a nod. "Did you tell him about the First Sage?"

"Hm, you can say I did, but also didn't," Villy acted all mysterious. "Either way, you did good not mentioning him. In general, you shouldn't talk openly about the First Sage with anyone. In fact, don't talk about him at all, not with me either, unless I ask about something specific, alright?"

“Alright,” Jake readily agreed, though a bit surprised at the request. He got the feeling more was going on than the Viper let on... not that he had much to say, as he also kept some secrets regarding the First Sage from the Viper. And now Villy had just told him to keep keeping those secrets, so... things had kind of worked out on that front?

“Good. Now let’s head back,” the snake god said with a relaxed smile.

Jake nodded, and side-by-side the two of them stepped onto the teleporter as they returned to the Order of the Malefic Viper, Jake himself going there for a brief pitstop before it was back to Earth.

“Now, notice the polluted area and avoid it. Applying your healing there would do more harm than good, so... alright, good job,” Duskleaf said as Meira desperately tried to avoid the spear-wielding plant soldier as she healed the warrior of her makeshift practice party, who was already busy dealing with two plant soldiers himself.

The warrior regained the use of his arm due to Meira’s healing as he killed one of the plant soldiers, but Meira was still struggling to deal with her pursuer. She summoned barriers to keep it at bay, but it was a lot stronger than it looked, breaking them apart one by one, forcing her to just run away and dodge instead.

Suddenly, when Meira thought she had some space to cast another healing skill, she saw the plant soldier speed up out of the corner of her eye. It shot toward her, and a brief moment of panic paralyzed her as she was stabbed through the chest. She felt the weapon pierce through her, and even if she had felt pain like this many times before, the pure killing intent in the blow made her freeze up, as she feared for her death.

“Stop,” Duskleaf said as he raised a hand. All the plant soldiers withered in an instant as a green light fell over Meira, instantly healing her completely, as she was still breathing heavily with wide-open eyes. She felt the place in her chest where she had been stabbed as Duskleaf went over to help her calm down.

The members of her makeshift party simply stood there with empty eyes, as Duskleaf had also deactivated them. They were all homunculi – mere imitations of life – and only there for her practice.

“I... I panicked,” Meira said in a disappointed tone.

"I know," Duskleaf just responded in a comforting tone.

Meira clenched her fists as she wanted to punch the ground. Again, she had lost her cool when things got rough. She had hesitated and frozen up for a split second when the spear-attack had come, making her get hit by an attack she now realized was entirely avoidable. The following killing intent only sealed the deal, and Meira just still couldn't quite get used to it.

"Can we go again?" Meira asked with determination. She felt disappointed in herself and wanted to make up for her failure. No, she had to make up for it if she wanted to go. Because as she was now, Meira would just be a burden for any party she went to Nevermore with.

This entire training was for her to prepare to head for the World Wonder or just become able to properly fight, and this training had been going on for longer than she felt comfortable admitting. After she had evolved to C-grade, Meira had been very confident in herself and wanted to head straight for Nevermore. However, that was when her teacher – Duskleaf – made her aware of just how lacking she was.

During her leveling in D-grade, she had done some dungeons and stuff to gain levels, but she had always done so in a pretty safe fashion. She never truly took any massive risks and was well-protected as a dedicated healer. However, she couldn't expect that in Nevermore or if she ever got in any real fights.

The problem was Meira had never really learned how to fight or deal with everything involved in fights. Especially not fights against superior foes. So, Duskleaf had set up this training to allow Meira to improve so she could one day head to Nevermore herself. She wasn't going to compete on the Leaderboards or anything like that – heck, she likely wouldn't go while still below level 210, disqualifying her – but she still wanted to at least pull her own weight when in there.

And to make that happen, she had to learn how to fight properly. As the Chosen of Duskleaf, she had to ensure that she didn't embarrass her Master and Patron, and as she was right now, she definitely would. Even Duskleaf had learned how to fight in his young days, as even alchemists had to be able to defend themselves.

"We could go again," Duskleaf said. "But I have the feeling you would prefer to go prepare before Jake comes back."

“Lord Thayne is returning?” Meira asked, surprised.

“That’s what I heard,” he responded rather casually. “Apparently, he has been doing a really interesting ritual with a bunch of demons before coming back, and from what I heard, I will definitely need a word with him.”

“Let’s stop here for today,” Meira quickly said as she took a brief look at herself. She was covered in dirt, grime, blood, and bits of flesh and liquids she wasn’t quite sure about. Her clothes were also mostly torn, and her hair was an absolute mess. Moreover, she wasn’t sure when she took a shower last... not like C-grades really needed showers or any cleaning they couldn’t handle with magic, but Meira still liked the feeling of cleanliness after a bath or shower.

Without delay, she headed off from the training area and teleported back to Lord Thayne’s residence to clean herself up and prepare for his return. Things were a bit messy there, and she wanted everything to look as it did when he left.

Teleporting back, she appeared on the lawn and-

“Oh, hey there,” she heard, freezing up as she slowly turned her head and saw Lord Thayne, who had seemingly also just teleported there.

#### Chapter 894: Years of Change

“Oh, hey there,” Jake said as he appeared at his residence and, less than a second later, saw Meira pop into existence. Seeing her, he couldn’t help but instinctively say hello as he got a good look at her.

For Jake, fifty years of Nevermore had passed, but for Meira, only three or so had gone by since their last meeting. Yet when he looked at Meira, he was certain that of the two of them, she was the one who had changed the most during their time apart.

Her entire aura had undergone a frankly shocking transformation. It was more qualitative than quantitative in nature, and when Jake used Identify, he quickly understood why.

[High Elf – lvl 206 – True Blessing of Duskleaf]



The first thing to note was definitely the fact that Duskleaf now had a Chosen. He also couldn't help but stare a bit at the "Duskleaf" in the Identify message, as it seemed a bit... off? It was weird to explain, but probably not anything that mattered much. No, what mattered was that Meira had been given his True Blessing, and that wasn't even the only big thing that had changed.

Somehow, she had also become a high elf. Jake wasn't sure about the exact requirements for an elf evolving to a high elf – something the Altmar Empire did much to ensure – but he did know the most basic of things, such as the requirement for an elf to have had a Perfect Evolution in D-grade and in general have a powerful Path. While Meira did get a Perfect Evolution back then, she definitely didn't meet all the other criteria for becoming a high elf. Of course, he quickly understood how she had done it anyway. Or, more accurately, who had done it for her, as this was definitely the work of Duskleaf.

Outwardly, she didn't look that much different than before, besides her eyes now having a deep golden color to them, and maybe her ears were a bit more pointy than before. Her blonde hair also looked a bit more golden blonde now maybe? It was hard to tell, honestly. People changing things like hair colors with evolutions was far from anything new. Shit, Carmen had changed hers from red to blonde at some point, Jake was pretty sure. Or maybe it was just covered in so much blood during their first meeting that it looked red?

Anyway, the thing about Meira that had changed the most was definitely the aura and overall demeanor she now exuded. And, of course, her power.

She was still far from being a peak genius who had a chance to compete on the Leaderboards. However, she would definitely be considered high-tier now, at least if one evaluated her purely based on her current aura. With time, Jake believed she could grow and become far more powerful.

While it was true that Meira had been subpar until she reached C-grade, that was far from the end of her Path or something that truly determined how powerful she could one day become. Jake's own massive growth in stats during C-grade thus far was proof of just how fast she could potentially catch up to others who also had powerful Paths in prior grades.

She had even begun to improve her combat skills based on the state of her clothing and the blood and gore still on her, which was great to see. That was one of the areas Jake had been the most nervous for her, as he never got the feeling she was much of a fighter.

With Duskleaf teaching her, Jake didn't doubt her skills – at least her crafting ones - would catch up with time, and he genuinely believed Meira had a bright future ahead of herself if she kept working as hard as she clearly had been during his time in Nevermore.

It was almost hard to imagine that it hadn't even been more than a few years since she first appeared before him. Back then, she had barely dared speak, and was practically shaking at all times when in his presence. Meira had been utterly incapable of making her own decisions, and it wouldn't be an understatement to say she didn't have a Path at all. At least none she could call her own. All she cared about was surviving another day, never looking toward the future.

Now, she seemed to have a purpose. Jake felt an odd sense of pride and happiness seeing Meira having come this far from where she once was, and he hoped she would continue the Path she was on. Duskleaf was definitely to thank for a major part of her transformation, but Jake still felt glad he had been the impetus. Going from a slave to the Chosen of a god in around half a decade had to be some kind of record, right?

Jake just looked at her as he had all these thoughts while Meira took a moment to gather herself before moving almost in instinct as she bowed.

"Welcome back, Lord Thayne," she said in a familiar tone that Jake chose to instantly take issue with.

"I don't think it's proper for my fellow Chosen to act this submissively," Jake said in a semi-joking tone.

Meira seemed to realize he was probably right as she quickly straightened her back and stood properly upright as she got back her bearings and spoke again.

"It's just... I did not expect you back this soon," Meira said, still a bit nervous, though at least she didn't stumble over her words as much as she used to. What's more, she actually met his eyes and didn't look down. "And congratulations on your performance on the Leaderboards."

"Thank you... and I'm not even sure where to start when congratulating you," Jake said. "High Elf, Chosen of Duskleaf, just reaching C-grade in general... lots of things to celebrate there."

Meira smiled at Jake's words as he looked as if she was about to do a small bow again, but stopped herself and only nodded. "I have done my best... but... Lord Thayne, would it be alright to speak in a bit? I want to return to my residence first to not dirty the main building with my current state."

Jake wasn't sure why that was necessary. It wasn't like Jake ever bothered to clean up before entering the main building, and if she was afraid of spilling blood and gore inside, she should be able to quickly remove it all with some magic.

Alas, Jake wasn't going to argue with her as he just nodded. "Alright, see you in a bit. I'm looking forward to hearing all you've been up to over the last few years."

"And I to hear of your exploits," Meira said, as she hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Perhaps you should also contact Irin? Reika, Scarlett, and Bastilla are all in Nevermore right now, and Izil has headed back to the Altmar Empire for a bit and shouldn't return before in a few months. It's just been me and Irin for a while now, and I'm sure she would also be elated upon learning of your return."

"Yeah, good idea, I should also tell her," Jake quickly agreed. This would also allow him to remember giving Irin that token thing he had received from the Demon Prince before he forgot he had it. Because he would totally forget he had it.

"I will see you in a bit," Meira said, as she barely managed to stop herself from bowing yet again as she just nodded instead. She turned to leave, and Jake looked after her as he couldn't help but speak up.

"Hey, Meira," Jake said, the high elf stopping mid-walk as she turned and looked at him, making him smile. "You're looking great. Keep up whatever you're doing."

Her eyes opened wide before she quickly whipped her head around and muttered in a small tone before hurrying back to her own residence. "Tha.... thank you..."

Jake saw her leave with quick steps as he kept smiling and shook his head. Meira still had a lot to learn even if she had come far, and the first lesson was to get some more self-confidence, even around Jake.

Going toward the main mansion, Jake felt nostalgic at the sight. Everything looked the same as when he left, and even faint remnants of the ritual that had hatched Vesperia could still be seen on one part of the large lawn.

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When he got inside, he made his way to the couch and plopped down before he took out the Order Token. The item had been inactive during his stay in Nevermore, but now that he was back in the Order, it had been reactivated. Also, while Jake took it out to contact Irin, he decided to do one other thing first.

Checking out the available lessons, he noticed quite an interesting trend. Lessons targeting early C-grades were nearly all gone, with nearly all those remaining catering toward one subject and one subject only: Nevermore. They were about how to make good parties, workshops to learn teamwork, meet-ups for those looking for party members, and general combat-related stuff that would prove useful within the World Wonder.

It wasn't that surprising. With a new version of Nevermore having just opened up, there was a rush to go there. Some wanted to compete on the Leaderboards to see if they could get a decent placement – decent in their cases being something like top 10,000 or even top 100,000. Because, yes, the Leaderboards gave titles to anyone who placed in the top 1,000,000. Of course, the title would be shit compared to the one Jake and the others who placed in the top 100 or even top 250, but they were still something any member of the Order would be proud to receive.

Others just wanted the experience and if they had to visit Nevermore, no time was better than now. Even for those like Scarlett who couldn't compete on the Leaderboards, this was an opportunity to get at least a few levels in an efficient manner.

For mid and high-tier C-grades, the lessons offered were more or less the same as usual, with a few added talking about post-Nevermore planning and whatnot. From what Jake gathered, a lot were unsure what to do right after leaving Nevermore and needed a kick in the ass to get going toward a new goal, with courses like this helping with just that.

Jake wasn't interested in attending anything; he just wanted to see what was available. At least he wasn't interested for now. Maybe in the near future, if he wanted to grind some alchemy before the Prima Guardian arrived, he would also attend a few lessons if they appealed to him.

Still sitting and fiddling with the Token, he finally decided to make contact with Irin. The Token had her contact information saved, and the second he dialed her, he got a response.

“Welcome back to the Order of the Malefic Vlper, Lord Thayne, Conquerer of Nevermore,” she said in a tone Jake couldn’t quite decide if was irony or genuine praise. Probably a mix of both.

“Thank you, Mistress Irinixis, Demon Who I’m Not Sure Has Even Been To Nevermore,” Jake answered, choosing to take the joking approach.

“Mistress has a nice tone to it... but no, I have not been to Nevermore for a good while,” Irin responded quickly. “The place just doesn’t particularly appeal to what I do, and in all honesty, I would drag down any party I went with.”

“Fair enough,” Jake said. It made sense. Irin only had a profession and a race, having chosen to forego a class. Her race did offer some combat measures, but ultimately, she didn’t have a Path suited for combat. Or, as Irin put it...

“You know I’m a lover, not a fighter. Also, I must say I’m flattered you contacted me this quickly after returning. You missed me?”

Maybe it was just Jake, but Irin seemed a bit more... straightforward than before. Then again, maybe it was just Jake. She had always been pretty aggressive and bold, so it wasn’t like she was acting out of character. In either case, Jake was all fine with playing along a bit.

“I did contact you to invite you to visit, but now I’m doubting if I should. Here I was, wanting to give you a souvenir, and I feel like you’re just teasing me,” Jake said with a sad tone.

“Oh? Now, you got me curious, but please tell me it isn’t the skull of a beast or something like that,” she said, clearly interested, though she didn’t seem to take his words that seriously, likely thinking Jake was just continuing to joke around.

“Nothing that grand. Just this Crest thing I got from the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell, who I recently helped absorb the Crystalized Devil Heart of some dead Cerulean Devil during a first-in-the-multiverse ritual, making him evolve into a Cerulean Demon Lord,” Jake casually said.

A brief pause followed before Irin spoke.

“... I’m coming over.”

“See you in a bit,” Jake grinned as the connection was cut, and he leaned back on the sofa as he waited for her and Meira to arrive to get him all caught up on recent happenings.

--

Dina relaxed back at her own small residence on the small planet she usually lived on within the domain of the Pantheon of Life. She had a lot to meditate on as she soaked in the sun while reflecting on the last few decades.

She hadn’t ever made many friends throughout her life, at least not before going to Nevermore. Part of the reason for this was just how busy she had always been, but another major reason was her lack of trust in others. Dina was the granddaughter of Nature’s Attendant and had inherited a version of his Bloodline. This gave her a status she had never quite felt comfortable with and put a barrier between herself and her peers. Dina did still have some acquaintances, but she never knew who was around her due to her status or because of who she was as a person.

When her grandfather had proposed the idea of entering Nevermore with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, she had been less than keen on it. Especially because she heard what people were saying about the idea. While they tried to be sneaky, the area controlled by the Pantheon of Life was naturally filled with plants, and they gladly shared all the secrets and gossip people had been talking about, thinking she couldn’t hear.

It was almost an open conspiracy that making her enter Nevermore with the Chosen was an attempt to forge a stronger connection between herself and the Chosen. That was why Dina hadn’t been keen, as she wasn’t interested in that kind of thing. Yet she had allowed herself to be persuaded, as she truly couldn’t say no to her grandfather, who seemed so excited at the idea.

So, with reluctance, she had joined his party... and she didn't regret that choice at all. While it took her a while to open up, she truly considered them all close friends by now. Sure, the Fallen King was arrogant and not the nicest, but he was always respectful when it mattered and kept an extra eye on her during combat. Sylphie was the sweetest, and she didn't have a single negative thing to say about the bird and she quite honestly felt angry at the thought of anyone even thinking negative things about her.

The Sword Saint was probably the one she had gotten the closest to. Perhaps because he reminded her a bit of her grandfather. It was weird that despite being a C-grade, the swordsman truly felt like an ancient existence, but it likely had something to do with his Path and Transcendence. He had been the man who made sure Dina had initially managed to integrate with the group, and Dina would be very sad if they didn't get the chance to meet again relatively soon.

Finally, there was, of course, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, Jake. And Jake was... odd. But not in a bad way. He was just always doing his own thing, and he always seemed to be looking forward, never back. His Path also confused her a bit. The Pantheon of Life had many hunters in it, Artemis being a prime example of this. However, in the eyes of the Pantheon, being a hunter was to be the enlightened version of a predator who coexisted and regulated the ecosystem. To be one with nature. And yet, Jake didn't at all fit this mold, exemplified by one thing more than any other:

His utter lack of any nature affinity. No, his almost antagonistic relationship with the affinity.

To have the nature affinity was something Dina had come to associate with hunters, so to see Jake without it had confused her more than anything else. However, with time, she came to understand and reached a conclusion she wasn't quite sure if she should share with anyone.

Jake couldn't be one with nature. He didn't exist with it or even seemed like he wanted to. He wasn't there to regulate some ecosystem or even care about its continued existence. Jake was to nature... no, perhaps the entire multiverse, what happened when people tried to interfere and assist an ecosystem by introducing some new creature that proved too strong for its environment.

He was like an invasive species. Too suitable for the ecosystem and nature to survive his presence, thus rejecting him. He was outside of nature, untethered by its natural laws. At least, this was Dina's theory on the matter.

In all honesty, Dina respected Jake a lot. He was incredibly strong, and whenever she was with him, she never felt like they could lose a fight. He always found a way to win, even when Dina feared they didn't stand a chance. As a person, she had also come to like him. Not in the way many members of the

Pantheon of Life had hoped, but as a close friend, and she believed he felt the same way. At least, she hoped he did.

As Dina was absorbing the powerful life energy of the sun while reflecting, she suddenly felt two new presences appear. One of them was her grandfather, who had left only half a day before, while the other one was Artemis, whom Dina was a bit surprised to see there.

“Dina, how are you adjusting now that you’re back home again?” her grandfather asked, with a bit of concern in his voice.

“I’m fine,” Dina smiled, happy to see him again so soon. While she had enjoyed Nevermore, she had still missed spending time with her grandfather.

“Good, good,” he said with a sense of relief as he suddenly turned a bit more serious. “She wants to see you.”

“Huh?” Dina asked with confusion.

“The Mother Tree has requested your presence,” Artemis further clarified. “Requested all of us.”

Dina quickly dispelled all other thoughts as she hurriedly stood up with a mix of confusion, anticipation, and a bit of fear. This would be her first time ever directly meeting her... meeting the Mother Tree.

“Please,” Dina said as her grandfather nodded with a proud smile before the three of them teleported away.

## Chapter 895: Yggdrasil

The Mother Tree. Tree of Life. World Tree. Primordial of Life.

Yggdrasil, like the other Primordials, had many names she went by. Dina wasn’t sure about the Primordial’s true origin, but based on history she had been a tree that had simply just never stopped growing. The entire Great Planet Yggdrasil called her home had her roots piercing deeply toward the core as the crown towered above the planet. The entire tree stood more than a hundredth of the entire



Great Planet's diameter tall, and there were legitimate concerns that even the Great Planet would one day prove too small.

Her crown was a vast network of planets, making the entire crown practically its entire own world. Within the crown, there were even subspaces housing large worlds and small galaxies. Countless beings within, and some even referred to it as its entire own universe. Which wasn't entirely incorrect... for it was all linked to the Divine Realm of Yggdrasil.

Most Divine Realms existed within the void. Hidden from all those who did not know where it was. However, some were able to directly absorb the realm into themselves and make it a part of their bodies. Yggdrasil was one such being – with the Starseizing Titan being another notable example – making her a living Divine Realm, her body representing the growth of her realm and power. This had some benefits and disadvantages for sure, the biggest disadvantage being that should someone manage to fully destroy Yggdrasil's body, it would also spell the end for her. Not that many considered that a legitimate possibility.

Dina had naturally seen Yggdrasil many times before. It was impossible not to, and the planet she usually lived on was close enough to the Great Planet that she could see the green glowing crown through space, like a massive star in the sky.

However, she had never interacted with the Primordial. Few people had, especially among mortals. The only notable one was her grandfather, Nature's Attendant, who acted as the right hand of Yggdrasil, dealing with everything that didn't directly pertain to her own realm.

As a tree, Yggdrasil did have some drawbacks that came with her Path, such as her inability to move. Even with her massive power, she could not move herself from the Great Planet she had taken root on... though Dina had heard some scary rumors that even if Yggdrasil couldn't move herself, she could move where she had taken root. The thought of an entire Great Planet getting forcibly moved through space in any way was more than a little scary in its own right.

Either way, Yggdrasil's limitations meant she very much focused on only her own immediate domain and let Dina's grandfather handle all the multiversal politics on her behalf. In fact, he handled pretty much everything the Pantheon of Life did, Yggdrasil very rarely taking any actions herself. Yet there was never any doubt who the true leader of the Pantheon of Life was, as when Yggdrasil did let her presence known and directly got involved in a matter, she never hesitated to take decisive action.

To ask for someone to meet her directly wasn't something that happened often either. The only instances Dina knew it happened was whenever a new god had arisen within the Pantheon of Life or when Yggdrasil decided to get a new Chosen. This matter was definitely not related to making Dina any kind of Chosen, though. If Dina would become the Chosen of anyone, it was her grandfather, and even if she wasn't, the Chosen of Yggdrasil was still alive last Dina heard.

This meant there was really only one thing this meeting could be about...

"Is... is this truly a matter important enough for the Mother Tree to get involved directly?" Dina asked as she traveled with her grandfather and Artemis. "I know Nevermore is important, but..."

"I talked to her after I returned," her grandfather said in a calm tone. "She was naturally interested, especially when I mentioned some matters related to the new leader of the All-Time Leaderboard. Even so, I was surprised when she said she wanted to see you directly. But don't worry, you're not in any trouble."

"I'm also surprised she asked for me. Is the reason she wants to see me related to... that?" Artemis asked, also sounding a bit concerned.

"To what?" Dina asked, having honestly been a bit confused as to why Artemis was even here, or had been at Nevermore in the first place. Dina didn't really know Artemis that well, but her best guess had been that she was interested in seeing a hunter take the top spot on the Leaderboards. It wouldn't be weird for her to take an interest in Jake... but it appeared there was more to it, and she hadn't taken the kind of interest Dina expected.

Artemis looked at Dina before sighing. "What do you think of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?"

"He's peculiar and definitely extremely powerful. He was also a brilliant party member, and I wouldn't have done as well in Nevermore as I did without him," Dina said after thinking a bit.

"Not like that," Artemis waved her off. "What do you think of him as a potential partner or mate? I know you know there were intentions to pair the two of you up."

Dina was a bit taken aback by the question, and she saw how her grandfather also wasn't that happy with the question... though he did seem curious about her answer. She was afraid to disappoint him, but she wasn't going to lie.

"I don't have any thoughts toward him in that vein at all. I also don't believe he does toward me," she quickly shut it down, fully expecting her grandfather and Artemis to be disappointed... and while her grandfather did let out a small sigh, Artemis reacted quite the opposite as she grinned.

"Great, then you won't complain if I decide to pursue him," Artemis said, as she seemed uninterested in hiding exactly what "that" was. "You know about my image in the Colosseum of Mortals and how those work, right?"

"I know," Dina confirmed with a nod.

"Well, my image and the Chosen got, let's just say, involved during his time in the Challenge Dungeon," Artemis said. "Very involved, if you catch my meaning."

"Wh... what?" Dina asked, as her eyes opened wide.

"You know, I'm kinda glad Jake didn't mention it; very respectful of him," Artemis said with a smile. "Anyway, that's why I went to Nevermore to see him for myself, and... let's just say I hope he takes me up on my invitation for some archery lessons."

Dina calling herself shocked would be an understatement. Jake had slept with the image of Artemis within the Challenge Dungeon? The images had the full memories of the gods themselves, effectively just making them unlinked avatars... she had never heard about this happening before. Much less with someone like Artemis, who Dina knew was famous for rejecting every potential partner introduced.

"What made you-"

"I think that's between me and him, wouldn't you agree?" Artemis threw Dina a glance, making a shiver run down her back as she nodded slowly, dropping the subject as she still mentally mulled over the subject. Upon deeper reflection, wasn't this great? If Jake formed a closer connection to the Pantheon of Life, it would only benefit the faction as far as Dina was concerned. For gods and mortals to pair up also wasn't that weird. In fact, it was practically the norm. Seeing as how two gods reproducing was simply too difficult and rare, it was normal for powerful mortals and gods to end up together with the goal of producing children, though it usually only happened when the mortal was S-grade.

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Their group of three remained quiet until they finally reached their destination. On the way, Dina deeply considered the Jake-Artemis matter and only got more on board the more she thought about it. They had traveled this last part toward the base of the utterly massive tree on a wooden barge floating through space. Once they got closer, they entered the trunk through a hole, and the second they were inside, Dina felt the pressure fall upon her.

She saw Artemis buckle a bit while her grandfather remained unaffected. Dina also felt her legs shake, but she managed to remain upright without many issues. They kept floating forward for a few more minutes as Dina looked around what may as well have been a massive cavern. She saw rivers run within the walls, and a vine moved here or there, as the life energy all around them was nearly suffocating. Without Yggdrasil's presence, elementals or creatures would be born in the millions every single day simply due to the environment.

Soon enough, they reached a ledge, and their barge docked as they got off. Dina followed after her grandfather, who led them through a small hallway before they reached a small hole leading into a large round chamber. There was a bit of furniture in the center, having grown out of the tree itself. To sit on this furniture would be like sitting on a part of Yggdrasil herself, making Dina feel a bit weird.

Even so, her grandfather and Artemis did not hesitate to sit as her grandfather motioned for her to do the same. With apprehension, Dina sat down, as she tried to keep her composure. She and Artemis both suffered from the constant pressure and while Dina found it a bit suffocating, she believed she would soon get used to it.

"You were right, Tonken," a voice suddenly echoed throughout the chamber. Dina felt the attention on her as she lowered her head a bit. "This is a first, child. You are the first C-grade to come here in many eras... and the first able to do so without a Bloodline or Transcendence allowing you to handle my presence."

"I will admit that this boon was not part of my initial intentions, and I view it as a happy accident," her grandfather answered with a smile.

"A happy accident indeed," the voice echoed again before it suddenly appeared much closer. "Tell me, child, what do you feel right now?"

Dina slowly lifted her head and saw a figure had appeared in front of her, sitting on a chair of wood. The woman looked a bit like Dina herself but didn't have things like antlers or flowers anywhere. She was nearly entirely green instead. She wore no clothes, with all the important parts covered with either her floor-length hair that looked like grass or small natural growths coming out of her body. Dina naturally knew she was looking at Yggdrasil – or at least the dryad form she had momentarily adopted. As for her question...

"Ne... nervous..." Dina said, looking down again.

"Look up at me," the Primordial said, Dina not daring to not obey the command. She lifted her head and looked forward, meeting the eyes of the dryad. She saw those endlessly deep green eyes as she felt her consciousness begin to waver for a moment before she had to avert her gaze.

"Intriguing. The soul does not appear mutated, yet it's clearly changed somehow..." Yggdrasil commented before turning to her grandfather again. "And this is caused by the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?"

"Undoubtedly," Dina's grandfather confirmed.

"And she was simply in his presence for an extended period of time for this to happen?" Yggdrasil continued.

"Correct," her grandfather once more confirmed, Dina also instinctively nodding a bit.

"hm," Yggdrasil sounded out before looking back at Dina. "That will be all; keep up the good work. I look forward to hearing of your continued growth."

With those words, Dina disappeared from within the tree, finding herself sitting back at her home in the very next second, sitting there as if she had never left in the first place.

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Jake took the time while waiting for Meira and Irin to play a bit with his Cradle and check in on the Soulflame progress. He still infused it with his arcane mana intermittently, but he kind of just had to leave it to do its own thing most of the time.

In the world within, the war of the Soulflames continued as they devoured one another constantly. Quite a few powerful Arcane Soulflames had been born by now, but none had reached the top tier yet. In fact, Jake had yet to see even a single pinnacle-tier Soulflame, much less a Supreme Soulflame, during all the time he had owned the mythical item. Checking its description, he had kind of hoped something had changed, but nope. He did take extra notice of one sentence, though.

“Only a single Soulflame can truly be born from the Cradle, the item getting destroyed upon extraction as all others become fuel for the chosen one.”

Reading this, Jake began to think that maybe seeing a Supreme Soulflame wasn’t even possible, and it could only be obtained upon extraction by further empowering a pinnacle-tier Soulflame. Or, he just had to wait long enough for one to actually appear.

This was definitely the most frustrating part of the Cradle of Soul’s Kindling. Jake didn’t truly have any control over when a useful Soulflame would be born. He couldn’t exert any direct control of the internal world. The entire Cradle was more or less just Minaga exploiting the system a bit by making a method to gamble far more efficiently. But it was still gambling.

Jake could get lucky tomorrow that a powerful Arcane Soulflame would appear within the Cradle and devour enough other Soulflames to become a Supreme one. However, he could also be so damn unlucky that he wouldn’t see any Soulflame he considered worth extracting before ascending to godhood.

Of course, there was one option Jake could try: seeing what would happen if he infused some of his Jake Juice. However, Jake wasn’t even sure that would help with anything. As mentioned, he had no control over the internal world, so if he sent in some of his special energy, he couldn’t even ensure his arcane energy within the Cradle merged with it. It would seriously suck if he accidentally empowered a random ice-affinity Soulflame, wasting his time and energy while even risking bricking the Cradle in the process.

No... no, the best choice right now was to simply be patient. There were a lot more Arcane Soulflames within the Cradle now than any other affinity, and with time, they would only dominate more. It was impossible to make his arcane affinity the only affinity in the internal world but to see so many Arcane Soulflames gave him hope. Plus, Jake believed himself a pretty lucky person, so it couldn’t be that long before fortune smiled upon him and blessed him with a banger Soulflame, right?

Putting away the Cradle, he felt a new presence arrive on the lawn outside. Through his sphere, he saw it was Irin, who looked a bit flustered and in a hurry as she made her way to the main mansion. He also saw Meira heading over, no longer in her combat attire but having switched to less bloody and torn clothes. He still didn't think the change was necessary, but oh well, who was he to police what kind of clothing people felt comfortable in, especially with his own tendency to wear a mask when around strangers.

Irin entered first as Jake got up from the sofa and went to greet her.

"Hey, Irin," Jake said with a smile as she entered the living room. As usual, she wore clothing that left little to the imagination, and when she saw him, she had an almost hungry look in her eyes that she quickly suppressed.

"Good to have you back," she smiled.

"Good to be back," Jake concurred as he made sure to remember the Crest for once. Taking it out of his spatial storage, he tossed the item to Irin casually. "Catch."

Irin instinctively did so as she looked at the item Jake had thrown, her eyes opening wide. She looked almost afraid to be holding the Crest. "This... do you even know what this is."

"According to the Demon Prince, a Crest of some sort that will be useful if I decide to visit the Hells," Jake shrugged as a thought struck him. "Actually, that got me wondering... I know barely anything about these Hells."

"You... you said you helped the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell with a ritual, not even knowing anything about the demon factions?" Irin asked, staring at him. "Tell me you at least signed a liability waiver before you did the ritual."

"Of course I did," Jake said in a serious tone.

For some reason, hearing Jake had the Demon Prince sign a waiver made Irin bite her lip before she licked it. She looked like she wanted to pounce on him then and there, but she quickly collected herself

when she heard the door open as Meira arrived. Nevertheless, she continued talking. "Alright... I guess a brief lesson in the social and political climate of demon aristocracy is in order, along with a brief introduction to the Nine Hells."

#### Chapter 896: Demon Lore Galore

Before Irin had her chance to launch into a lengthy explanation about the demon race, Meira entered the living room. The high elf instantly spotted the succubus as she smiled. "Irin! It's great you could come over so fast."

To Jake's surprise, Meira went over and hugged the succubus, who happily returned the gesture. After their brief hug, Meira joined Jake on one of the couches as Irin sat down on a third one, Jake noticing how the two of them made some small talk while being all smiles.

Okay, they have definitely gotten closer during my absence, Jake noted. It was honestly good to see that Meira had made some more friends. Jake also didn't doubt that Irin would gladly make friends with Meira, if not for pragmatic and selfish reasons, as surely it would only be beneficial to be friends with the Chosen of Duskleaf.

With everyone settled down, they finally got back to business as the succubus looked at Jake.

"So, I'm just going to assume you aren't that aware of how the demon race as a whole works. Am I right to have this assumption?" Irin asked, Jake slowly nodding. While he did know a bit, his knowledge was definitely limited, and a bit of repeated information had never killed anyone.

"Alright, let's start from the basics. While most demons you have encountered thus far were enlightened, there are far, far more types, with the majority being classified as monsters. The thing is, these are rather rare to find outside of certain specific areas, as they require demonic energy to be born, and the non-intelligent ones rarely, if ever, stray out of demonic lands. They tend to progress far slower outside, after all."

Jake nodded along, knowing this part already from some books he had read. Demonic beasts and monsters in that vein totally existed, and Jake kind of wanted to encounter one at some point. Alas, as Irin said, they were rare outside of demonic lands.



“Demonic lands can be found... well, pretty much anywhere. A few planets exist here and there that naturally possess the demonic affinity, and you can find certain sectors in every universe where it is the dominant affinity, making it a bit similar to the death affinity in that regard,” the succubus continued, as she even supplemented her explanation with projections of mana.

“However, the most well-known areas classified as demonic lands are no doubt the Nine Hells, also called the Nine Circles of Hell,” she continued as the mana projection changed, showing nine layers stacked atop one another. “Do you know of the origin of the Nine Hells?”

“I’m going to assume they were created by the system,” Jake made an educated guess.

“Yes and no. The history of the Nine Hells is a bit complicated, to say the least. The brief explanation is that, at first, it was artificially created by a group of nine devils to establish some form of safe haven and home base for all the demonic races by turning their respective Divine Realms into a Hell each, with every Hell symbolizing aspects of the devil’s Path. With time, they began to be known as the Nine Circles of Hell, representing sin and whatnot. Not to be confused with Sin Curses... though curse magic is very much a staple among demons, so I can’t really say there isn’t any connection.

“Anyway, the Nine Hells exist in a separate dimension, accessible from all the universes far more easily than another universe, which is part of the reason why demonic summoning is such a prominent thing. The veil is incredibly thin, and even I have a treasure allowing me to enter the Nine Hells at any moment without much trouble,” she continued, surprising Jake quite a bit. He knew snippets, and he knew how people could summon things from the “demonic realms,” but he didn’t know this was part of the reason. There was also the demon’s innate racial skills related to summoning, so more likely than not, it wasn’t that the demons adapted to the Nine Hells, but that the Nine Hells were created with demonkind in mind.

Looking at Meira, the high elf clearly already knew all this, making Jake feel a bit out of the loop as Irin continued her history lesson.

“These Nine Hells were expanded by more and more devils, as a hierarchy was formed, until the integration of the sixth universe. I am not exactly clear on how or why it happened, but the system adopted the Nine Hells and made it into what it is today: a World Wonder. A quite unique one at that, as it’s more or less its own separate universe filled solely with demonic energy and owned by the demonic races. And that concludes my brief history lesson on the Nine Hells and how they came to be,” the succubus finished.

“I see,” Jake nodded. “That was very enlightening, and-“

“Oh no, that was just the history part... now we’re on to the political climate of the Nine Hells,” Irin smiled devilishly, not even giving Jake a break. “Each of the Nine Hells is ruled by a devil, family, or clan. These rulers of the Nine Hells are referred to as nobles, and status has a huge significance in demon culture. This is part of the reason I’m happy to be here right now, as just me working as your assistant of sorts has granted me quite a lot of respect among my peers.”

“Well, glad to be of assistance,” Jake smiled and shook his head. “And let me guess, the Cerulean Demon is part of the family that rules the Fourth Hell?”

“Correct,” Irin confirmed. “The Fourth Hell is ruled by a powerful demon family that has controlled it for a long time, with the Cerulean Devil you mentioned as one of their most notable figures before he died. The Demon Prince you met is one of the most important figures in the younger generation, and he has a peak status among mortals. His title of prince also means his father is the current ruler of the Fourth Hell.”

Jake nodded along as he asked curiously: “Are the Nine Hells ranked based on power? The Demon Prince said the Crest should allow one to be treated well in at least the four first Hells.”

“Again, it’s a bit more complicated than that,” Irin sighed. “Each of the Hells has a different environment. The Fourth Hell is filled with demonic lightning and wind, making it a suitable environment for those who have that kind of affinity. As each ruler of the Hells has held their throne for a long time, no one can really be sure who is the strongest anymore. Though there is some truth to it being ranked based on power, as none would dare argue against the ruler of the Ninth Hell being the strongest by a landslide.”

“How would this ruler of the Ninth Hell square up against, let’s say, a Primordial?” Jake wondered out loud.

“That...” Irin said as she hesitated before steeling herself. “This is not meant to be taken the wrong way... but it very much depends. If the fight takes place within the Nine Hells, the ruler will have an advantage, while if the confrontation happens outside, the Primordial will have an edge. There is a story from a few eras ago where the ruler of the Ninth Hell and Eversmile got into a contractual dispute that ended in a fight where Eversmile had the advantage at first until they changed venue to the Nine Hells, at which point Eversmile chose to retreat.”

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“So, not a pushover, got it,” Jake nodded as he seemed to get the gist of it. “What you are pretty much telling me is that the Crest I tossed to you earlier grants the person holding it the status of a demon part of the aristocracy within the Nine Hells, right?”

“More than that,” Irin said in a serious tone. “It signifies you are an important and highly valued guest of the faction the Crest belongs to. These Crests are only ever given out by the respective leaders of the Hells, meaning should you do anything to someone holding a Crest, it will be viewed as a personal attack on them. It also means they take responsibility for the one they granted the Crest to.”

“Surprised the Demon Prince said it was fine for me to hand it to someone else,” Jake muttered.

“He probably expected you to hand it to an envoy. Someone acting as your agent if you didn’t have anything you wanted yourself but perhaps needed something for your subordinates,” Irin theorized.

“I don’t really have any subordinates,” Jake muttered.

“A lot of people, me included, would vehemently disagree with that statement,” the succubus just smiled and shook her head. “You may not officially make anyone your subordinates, but that doesn’t mean they won’t be subordinate to you.”

Jake wanted to argue... but deep down, he knew it would be a waste of time, as Irin was most definitely correct.

“Anyway, you’ll take the Crest, right?” Jake asked, wanting to change the subject. “I don’t need it, and I reckon you can get something useful with it.”

“If I’m being perfectly honest, I’m not even sure I dare use it,” Irin sighed. “The amount of questions I will be bombarded with will be suffocating, and it will lead to a needless amount of rumors. It would have been better if you got a Crest from someone in the second circle of Hell.”

“Let me guess, the circle of lust and home to many succubi?” Jake made an educated guess.

“And here I thought you didn’t know anything about demons,” Irin raised an eyebrow.

“Just a really good guess,” Jake smiled. Honestly, guessing things based on memories of myths from Earth had a shocking level of accuracy, though the details did tend to, more often than not, be a bit off. Like... sure, Valhal was some mythical realm of nordic mythology before the system, meaning the halls of the fallen or something like that. In reality, it was called Valhal because Valdemar had literally called his faction Valdemar’s Mead Hall in the early days, and with time, that name had been shortened to Valhal. Literally, Valdemar’s Hall.

“But, yes, you’re correct. It’s the Hell run by a succubus, the strongest of my race, and is a land filled with illusions and dreams,” Irin confirmed, adding on with a smirk. “A very popular holiday destination, too, in case you’re interested.”

“At this point, I’m pretty sure I have standing invitations to visit half of the factions in the multiverse; I have no idea when I would even find the time,” Jake sighed.

“Hopefully, time will become an infinite resource,” Irin smiled. “Besides, I’m sure you can learn to create avatars or something and just send those to visit all the places you neglected at some point.”

“That feels pretty disrespectful,” Jake muttered, not really keen on the idea. “But, back on topic... what the hell should I do with the Crest if you don’t want it?”

“I said I wasn’t certain I dared use it, not that I wasn’t interested,” Irin said with a smile. “Chances just are I’ll take my master along or go with a group to not stand out as much. Of course, you could also go with me, and we could stop by the second circle on the way back...”

“Tempting offer, but I think I’ll pass,” Jake said, really not having the time.

“A pity,” Irin smiled.

“Anyway, enough about me and all this demon stuff... what have you two been up to during these last few years, and how have things changed around here?”

“Can’t say I have much to report,” Irin shrugged. “Things are very much as usual, outside of the rush for Nevermore and the many local celebrations recently taking place upon learning that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper topped the All-Time Leaderboard. Personally, I believe I have made good progress, but nothing too outstanding. At least not compared to the honored Chosen of Duskleaf, Grand Elder of the Order, and disciple of the Malefic Viper.”

“Irin...” Meira muttered, a bit embarrassed.

“Irin indeed!” Jake said in a stern tone. “How dare you joke around with the venerable Chosen of Duskleaf? You are lucky she is too merciful to have you whipped for such disrespect!”

“I am truly blessed, allowed to be in such company,” Irin also continued to joke. “Though I wouldn’t necessarily be opposed to a bit of whipping...”

Meira just glared daggers at them both before they stopped, and Jake waved it off. “Joking, joking. It’s no lie; you’re definitely the one who has undergone the most changes, so what have you been up to, Meira? And don’t even try to downplay because you must have had quite an eventful period.”

The high elf took a moment before she sighed. “Alright, yeah, quite a lot has happened. Shortly after you left to Nevermore...”

Meira proceeded to explain everything she had been up to over the last few years. How Duskleaf had continued to teach her, her leveling of her class and profession to get a Perfect Evolution to C-grade, and how the god had helped her become a high elf. Duskleaf had then blessed her with a True Blessing, making her his first Chosen in many, many years.

At this point, Irin added, a bit teasingly, how both Duskleaf and Meira had wanted to avoid any kind of celebration and how Meira had more or less hidden away for a while. Alas, such things could not be kept secret for long, and ultimately, an official notice was sent off. Luckily, Duskleaf was already known as a bit of a recluse, so no one questioned when no big ceremony was held.

Continuing her story, Jake heard how she had returned to her home village, and when Jake heard about everything that had gone down there, he couldn’t help but smile. He smiled not just at what she had done but at the mere fact she had gone there. To want to take control of her home and help her family

members was a selfish decision that had nothing to do with Jake or anyone else but something she had decided solely by herself.

This was one of the things Meira had needed to work on the most: being selfish. So to see her leverage her newly gained position was honestly great in Jake's eyes. What she had done with her old clan was also good. She had effectively freed them all from slavery and made them part of her own faction of sorts.

Meira didn't talk that much about this, though, but more about how she had spent time with her family and how it took a bit for them to get used to what she had become. Luckily, her siblings were very accepting, but her mother had taken a bit.

Jake saw Meira's happiness as she explained helping out her family and clan. With it now being known Meira originally came from there, some people who wanted to get in her and Duskleaf's good graces had even moved there to improve the area further, with the clan members now all considered true members of the Order... which kind of got Jake thinking.

If Jake had revealed himself as the Chosen... couldn't he also have just freed Meira from being a slave the very day they met and just declared her an official member of the Order? Oh, he definitely could have, couldn't he?

Not that Jake regretted how he handled everything when he looked at Meira. He had no idea what would have happened to her if he had just freed her, but he seriously doubted she would be doing as well as she was now.

Meira continued with all her exploits, as it truly did sound like she had done more in three years than Jake had in fifty. Granted, she did spend a bit of time in a time chamber reading a lot of books at one point, but it hadn't been that long.

After a while, the conversation shifted again as Irin and Meira began to ask Jake questions about his own time in Nevermore and everything that had happened there. Sadly, Jake couldn't really share that much due to the rules of Nevermore not allowing one to share specific details, but he could give an overall overview of some things.

As they were all talking, Jake suddenly felt something. The barrier around his personal residence had been reinforced by the Malefic Viper to ensure no one could peek inside or get in without Jake's permission, yet at this moment, Jake felt a small hole open in it... opened by the Viper himself. Ah, but not for his own avatar to enter...

Jake turned his head and stared out the window. Irin and Meira also stopped their conversation when they noticed Jake suddenly get distracted as they turned just in time to see a massive worm fall down from the sky, landing on his lawn with a big thump, as yet another Chosen had joined their little get-together.

#### Chapter 897: Planting Seeds & Sandy's Return

Within the largest tree of the multiverse, Artemis, Nature's Attendant and the avatar of Yggdrasil, remained even after Dina had been teleported away.

The Primordial seemed to be in thought for a moment before turning to Artemis. "Either you have made significant progress in a very short amount of time, or the aura of the Viper's Chosen has even affected you despite the briefness of your encounter."

Artemis didn't even hesitate to agree. "Undoubtedly, albeit the effect is nothing compared to what Nature Attendant's granddaughter experienced."

"Even so, this proves it even works on gods," Yggdrasil continued. "Tell me, were you aware of the change taking place?"

"No," Artemis shook her head. "Only after I deeply inspected myself did I notice anything."

"I see," Yggdrasil nodded. "Any changes to your divine realm?"

"None," Artemis once more shook her head. "I do not think there are any tangible changes in any form. It's more like a shift in perspective. It's not that much different to how when I feel the aura of the Mother Tree, the auras of others just seem insignificant in comparison, even if they are more powerful than myself."

“Are you saying my aura is insignificant compared to the Viper’s Chosen?” Yggdrasil asked in an amused, almost joking tone.

“That is...” Artemis said, taking the question entirely serious. “In some aspects, yes. There is a sense of... superiority within his aura. One that naturally has to exist above any other, suppressing others not out of any desire or choice, but simply because it’s expressing the rightful way of the world.”

“His aura matched that of Valdemar’s in pure quality,” Nature’s Attendant chimed in as he frowned a bit. “No... saying it matched Valdemar’s isn’t entirely accurate. It simply clashed with Valdemar’s, not allowing it to gain any dominion where not allowed.”

“And that which was not allowed to be imposed upon included Artemis,” Yggdrasil said with a smile. “I am beginning to understand your interest in him.”

“Does that mean-“

“You have my permission, but wait,” the Primordial interrupted Artemis. “Wait till he matures. Grows into something more sustainable than he is now. While attention is good, even the most rigorous of plants will wither if given too much.”

“If he perishes, his Bloodline will disappear with him,” Nature’s Attendant added in a serious tone.

Yggdrasil just smiled. “If that happens, perhaps it’s simply nature correcting itself. That, or he will be able to overcome even the natural balance. Either way... I look forward to seeing what he grows into. Ah, but feel free to continue planting the seeds for a budding future; it would be a shame for someone else to reap what we failed to sow.”

With these words, the avatar Yggdrasil faded away, leaving Artemis and Nature’s Attendant behind as the two of them didn’t wait before they left the Mother Tree, both with quite some food for thought.

In the multiverse, countless Paths existed. The vast majority did have significant overlap, though, falling into either the camp of crafting or fighting. Extrapolated a bit to include monsters, this meant either being in charge of creating and rearing the next generation, leading their kin, or fighting. In fact, of all Paths in the multiverse, one thing was a near-constant:



Fighting and killing.

Even those who focused on creation tended to leave a mountain of corpses in their wake. It was simply how the multiverse worked. To battle was the most simplistic form of displaying superiority over others. No matter how good of a crafter you were, what did it matter if others could simply rob you of your creations or kill you outright?

Yet, some Paths did exist that didn't revolve around fighting. Jacob was one example of this. He was purely in the "creation" department. He helped guide people to improve their Paths and was a leader and spiritual guide of sorts. One could almost say he was a crafter of other people.

But... on very, very rare occasions, there were those with Paths that had nothing to do with either creation or even fighting. Those who didn't particularly fit into any box, but were so specialized in one extremely fringe direction.

One such example was the giant worm that had just fallen on Jake's lawn, ripping up the soil and making a real mess of things. Sandy had a Path that didn't require them to craft anything nor to ever fight. Sandy was specialized in doing one thing, and one thing only:

Eating.

And getting away with eating stuff that belonged to those who specialized in fighting.

This had resulted in Sandy being an utterly lopsided existence that, quite frankly, was borderline useless in battle. All the big worm could do was ram people or try and eat them, and based on all Jake knew, Sandy could only really eat those a lot weaker. The purpose of eating them also wasn't to kill them but to use them as "resources" within the worm's internal world.

Besides eating, all of Sandy's other abilities had gone into the art of escape and durability. While this kind of Path was rarely one that worked out well in the multiverse due to the lack of self-defense... well, Sandy seemed to be doing pretty well for themselves when Jake used a quick Identify as he, Meira, and Irin walked outside the talk to the worm that was wiggling on the grass.

[Juvenile Cosmic Genesis Worm – lvi 242]

“Hey Jake!” the worm yelled telepathically the moment Jake walked outside. “Oh! Succubus and the elf are also here! Or should I call her a high elf now? Speaking of, why is it even called a high elf? Did she even get taller? Oh, wait, I ate this thing called a Highmountain-something, and that one was from a high mountain, so that name made sense... oh, I know, maybe high elves originally come from big mountains? Hey, high elf, that isn’t actually that high; why are you called a high elf?”

Meira just stared with a confused expression for a moment before muttering. “I... don’t know exactly why we’re called high elves... but it’s probably to signify it’s a higher race of sorts compared to usual elves? While the stats aren’t different compared to regular elves, we do have different racial skills.”

“I guess that can make sense, too,” Sandy readily accepted the answer that was frankly way more serious than Sandy’s question deserved. “Anyway! Jake! I heard you’re back, and you are now an even bigger deal than before because you did some stuff on a Leaderboard!”

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“I am back indeed, and I did do stuff on a Leaderboard,” Jake smiled, honestly happy to see Sandy again. The big worm was always interesting to be around, even if it did feel a bit weird talking to the giant mound of wiggling flesh on his lawn.

“That’s great! Speaking of great, am I the only one who’s starving?” Sandy said as Jake felt the expectant attention of the cosmic worm on him. However, before he could even say anything, Irin spoke up.

“I do believe we could all do with a snack, and while I’m not sure if Jake has anything you find appealing, I hope my offering can at least help please the Chosen of the Lord Protector.”

With these words, she waved her hand as a bunch of lockboxes appeared, making Jake throw her a look.

“Items given to me by the top brass should I encounter the Chosen of the Lord Protector,” she quickly clarified with a telepathic message as she smiled at him. Jake definitely did notice how she very heavily implied all this stuff was from her alone...

“Oh! That does smell good... just a second, I’m on a bit of a diet and have to watch what I eat, so I’ll just have my dietitian take a look at things,”

Sandy said happily as the worm wiggled a bit and floated into the air as they opened their mouth.

Space distorted as a man wearing an expensive-looking suit appeared.

“Wh... where am I!? What happened, wh-“

“Oops, wrong guy!” Sandy said as they sucked the man back in before spitting out another suit-wearing man, this one far more put together.

“Does Lord Sandy require my services?” he asked the second he oriented himself.

“Yep! That stuff over there!” Sandy said, the man somehow knowing where Sandy mentally pointed.

Turning around, the man spotted Jake and the others before his eyes opened wide as he bowed. “I greet the Chosen of the Malefic One, as well as the Chosen of the Grand Elder.”

“Hey there, don’t mind us and attend to your matters,” Jake quickly said, Meira nodding in agreement. With their approval, and while dealing with the pressure of being in the presence of three Chosen, the man went over to the offering and began to go through them with a clipboard. While that was interesting in its own right, Jake was more interested in what had happened before.

“Who was that first guy?” Jake asked, confused as he turned to look at Sandy.

“Oh, that was just Tom.”

“And who is Tom?”

“A guy I ate.”

“Why did you eat Tom?”

“A better question is: why wouldn’t I eat Tom?”

Jake just looked at Sandy as he sighed. “You know what? Fair enough. Why do you need a dietitian anyway?”

“Eh, something about eating more quality over quantity and stuff like that. Basically about me not wasting time digesting stuff that isn’t worth digesting,” Sandy said.

“I see,” Jake nodded, that making a lot of sense to him. It was probably like how Jake shouldn’t waste his time hunting weaker prey. He could totally see Sandy only benefitting from certain kinds of natural treasures by now as they got stronger. There was definitely also a Records aspect to it.

No matter the case, Jake was sure the Lord Protector had this handled. The Boundless Hydra was very good at eating stuff himself, so Jake felt confident that if anyone was qualified to give Sandy advice on the Path of devouring, it was him.

With the dietitian hard at work, Jake changed the subject a bit. “What are your plans regarding this Prima Guardian system event, by the way? Are you heading back to Earth with the rest of us?”

“Maybe?” Sandy responded. “Not sure I should. The rules about the Prima thing said that beasts who consumed unique system-given stuff in the early days aren’t allowed to fight against the big boss, only alongside it, and, well, I ate a lot of system-given stuff back then.”

“I... hadn’t really thought of that,” Jake muttered. “Then again, can you even fight? Say, what if you just help doing stuff that isn’t directly related to fighting, like helping people travel around faster or something? I doubt the system would force you to fight for the Prima Guardian, so indirect help may be allowed.”

“Based on what I know of these system event bosses, I believe Jake’s assessment is correct,” Irin chimed in. “Historically, in cases like these, the system-empowered entities won’t be controlled or forced to do anything, but they may be punished if they choose to go against the event boss. It’s also equally possible

this Prima Guardian will have a unique ability supressing anyone who consumed these system-provided items, making it near-impossible for them to fight against the boss.”

“Hm, if the succubus who brings me tasty snacks is right, I guess I should return. Maybe I can even find some good stuff to eat in the ninety-third universe. I have heard people talking about how new universes tend to have a lot of tasty stuff in their infancy...” Sandy seemingly agreed after thinking a bit.

“Actually, can you even go? What about the people you ate? Will they be able to go to the ninety-third universe with you?” Jake suddenly had a thought.

“Good question that I already thought about all on my own! They totally can; I just can’t let them out. Like, I already tried it once for funsies, kind of thinking that the person would go boom or something, but nope, they just won’t come out no matter what I do. Ah, but don’t worry, Tom can come out; he is from our universe,” Sandy gladly explained.

“... good to know?” Jake muttered. “Did you eat Tom on Earth?”

“No? What a silly question; there’s no way Tom would be from Earth!” Sandy said, wiggling in laughter.

Jake really wanted to ask more about Tom but stopped himself as he sighed. “In that case, will you return with me when I head back? I plan on going... actually, probably just later today. I don’t think I have a lot I have to do at the Order; I mainly came by to say hi to these two.”

He said the last part while motioning to Irin and Meira. Alright, he had not come specifically to see these two, but the people he knew in the Order. Seeing as everyone else was away, he only really had these two he wanted to check in on.

“You’re leaving already?” Irin said in a downtrodden tone, with Meira not looking happy at the news either.

“Not like I won’t come by once in a while,” Jake smiled, shaking his head. “Things here in the Order are a lot more stable than places such as Earth. I feel like it’s better I’m there. Also, I am more than a little curious to see how things have developed over the last three or so years. Finally... there are a few places I’ve been meaning to check out. Maybe even some places you can help me get to, Sandy.”

“Sure, as long as I can eat everything there while you deal with all the things not wanting me to eat everything there,” the gluttonous worm agreed. “It’ll be like in the old days!”

“Hopefully, with less stress,” Jake smiled. While his adventure with Sandy had been fun, the circumstances in which they had happened hadn’t been. He could definitely do without another invasion.

Shaking off the thought, the four of them kept speaking for a while before they moved things inside, which was when Jake saw just how much Sandy had improved their spatial abilities.

The giant worm, around a hundred meters long in total, rapidly shrank down at an incredible speed. In a mere moment, Sandy went from a giant worm to a small grub no larger than a guinea pig. Sandy proceeded to jump on Jake’s shoulder, catching a ride as they all went inside to continue the conversation that Sandy had so rudely interrupted when they decided to drop in.

Now, they had just added another person to share their adventures over the last few years. Adventures Sandy gladly shared all the details about, though, for some reason, it was always framed around what was eaten rather than the enemies or the grand vistas Sandy saw while flying around with S-grades and gods alike.

Their talks continued for the rest of the day as they all got caught up, but soon, it was time. Jake had a planet to attend to, and much of the doubt he had about leaving Meira alone had been dispelled. He knew how dependent on him she had seemed, but now, she truly had grown into her own person and had a status of her own. It genuinely made him happy, and he looked forward to what she would one day become.

As for Irin... well, she made it no secret that she planned on sticking as close to Jake as long as possible, no matter the cost. Jake wasn’t blind to the fact that he had also entirely altered her Path and future, and in retrospect, he should probably have cut her off a long time ago if he didn’t plan on allowing her to stick with him going forward.

Not that Jake would have cut her off or planned to not allow her to stay around, and he tended not to be a fan of dwelling on the past. In fact, doing so was pretty darn antithetical to his Path.

Jake headed off to the teleportation circle with a shrunk Sandy on his shoulder - after they ate the dietitian and the approved food - and as they said their goodbyes, Jake saw the disappointment on both the women's faces as they had probably hoped he would stick around a bit longer.

He would definitely return even before the Prima Guardian to check in on things, but for now, he had quite a few places he wanted to visit once back on Earth... including a mountain with a certain wyvern he very much wanted payback on. Who knows, maybe it was even time to take a step for mankind and do a little moon trip...

#### Chapter 898: An All New Haven

Jake hadn't been back to his own universe for over three years, and if he was being perfectly honest, he wasn't looking forward to what Haven had become during his absence. He was afraid it had changed more than he liked, and he especially feared learning what had happened with his good old lodge. He was pretty sure Miranda or someone else had taken care of it during his absence to make sure it wasn't too horrible, but what if they had turned it into a tourist destination or something? Fuck, maybe someone had constructed a viewing deck overlooking it!

He could totally see that happening, especially with Miranda gone for Nevermore herself. Actually... who was even in charge of Haven right now? Lillian and Miranda were usually the ones doing everything, but neither of them were there. Maybe Hank? Jake sure as hell hoped it wasn't just some random person who Arthur put in charge.

These were just some of the thoughts Jake had as he went through the void. The only change he knew of for sure was the teleportation circle back in Haven allowing him to teleport back there directly. Those snakes in Scarlett's former territory had improved their special magic circle significantly to the level where Jake could easily teleport to most regular teleportation circles back on Earth. From how Jake understood it, it was a bit like a phone forwarding a call, with the call, in this case, being someone teleporting through the void with a shrunk-down cosmic worm on his shoulder.

A few seconds after stepping on the teleporter back in the Order, Jake was back on Earth, the void treating him nicely this time around, with no eldritch beings wanting a chat during his travel. He was actually a bit surprised to see how Sandy wasn't at all affected by the warping space, despite using space magic on themselves, but he wasn't going to question how any of that worked.

"Home sweet home!" Sandy said with glee as they appeared within the large basement complex beneath Jake's lodge. Through his sphere, he naturally saw it all, including that nothing had really changed down there. Honestly, seeing it made him feel kind of bad when he remembered all the work Hank had gone through to make it, only for Jake to never really use the place.

The facilities are still pretty good, though... considering I just need a cauldron to do alchemy, I should stay here more, Jake reckoned. Plus, there were some actual benefits to doing alchemy there due to the Pylon of Civilization – an often forgotten aspect of how cities on Earth now worked. It was also a bit more private, with no one able to contact him as easily.

Looking at the Pylon Jake owned, he saw it was still there, though it had changed slightly as expected. It had grown denser with more energy as Jake and especially Miranda had grown in power. Standing there, he also felt the slight increase in mana regeneration he benefitted from within the borders of the Pylon. There was also that minor increase in experience earned for non-combat activities. However, Jake didn't even think that worked anymore. It was just an early incentive to make people seek out cities outside of the safety they offered.

Shaking his head, Jake smiled at Sandy's expression of being happy to be home. "Good to be back, indeed."

Making his way up to the lodge, he felt quite nostalgic. Especially when he entered the lodge itself. Everything looked as the day he left, even the bed Jake had dragged from the Tutorial Challenge Dungeon way back in the day. The rest of the furniture was also mostly the same that he had dragged with him back then.

"Looking cozy," Sandy said, wiggling a bit around. "Not much to eat around here, though... except for that tree outside."

"It's not a tree," Jake quickly corrected the worm.

"It looks like a tree."

"But it's not."

"If it looks like a tree, smells like a tree, and sounds like a tree, it's a tree,"

Sandy insisted.

"You literally don't have eyes," Jake pointed out.



"And yet I can see it's a tree," Sandy said in a disappointed tone. "Look, I can test if it also tastes like a tree, and-"

"I'm going to give you a full lesson about the difference between a musa and a tree if you keep this up," Jake threatened.

"Oh, it's a musa? You should have just said that from the beginning!" Sandy quickly stopped arguing as the two of them walked outside to the clearing. Going down the steps from the porch, Jake took in the sights as everything here also looked very much the same. The trees had maybe grown a little, and the grass was definitely due for mowing, but besides that, things were serene, with no tourists anywhere to be seen. No viewing decks overlooking the valley either.

Jake purposefully held himself back from using a Pulse of Perception to allow him to take in everything a bit at a time. Looking at the banana musa, Jake went over to it for a quick inspection. There were a few bananas growing on it, and the magic circle Mystie had placed a long time ago was gone with time. Size-wise, the musa was pretty much the same as it had been the last time he saw it, though he did feel that it had grown at least a little.

He considered the manure he had received and if he should use it right away but stopped himself, as it was definitely better to have someone with gardener skills to do it for improved effect. However, he did do something incredibly smart.

Taking out all of the bags, he placed them not far from the musa. That way, they would serve as visual reminders whenever he was there so he wouldn't forget!

"That soil stinks," Sandy commented. "Wait... it's not soil, is it? Did you really just take out literal bags of poo?"

"It's called manure and is a very common aspect of farming," Jake defended the bags that he could see come off as disgus-

"Can I have a little taste, pretty please?" the worm asked in a pleading tone while wiggling.

Jake looked at the worm for a moment before shaking his head." Sorry, it's for the musa, maybe if there are some leftovers, but that will depend on who I find to help spread it and what they say."

"Fine... Tom would have let me have some..."

Ignoring Sandy entirely, Jake went over to the small pond and waterfall as he felt something within it. Looking down into the water, he saw a lot of small eels swimming around, making him smile at how serene it all seemed... until he used Identify on one of them.

Yeah, that's a D-grade, Jake quickly confirmed. Actually... nearly all of them were D-grades. Looking down at them, he saw a few stare back up at him. He stood there for a few moments before just turning around, shaking his head.

They didn't seem aggressive in the slightest, and using his sphere, he saw an underwater tunnel lead down deep into the ground from the pond, likely connecting to the underworld of the planet. No need to complain about a bunch of nice eels guarding his little pond.

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Jake checked out the exterior of the lodge a bit more before he decided it was time to head out into Haven proper. But, before that...

"Hey, Sandy, do you have a good stealth skill? I want to go explore a bit without attracting the attention of half the planet," Jake asked the cosmic worm.

"Eh... kind of? It's not really a stealth skill, but I can disappear," Sandy answered as the worm wiggled a bit before suddenly popping out of existence. Yet, as Jake felt a bit deeper, he felt as if something was still there...

Before he could understand what Sandy did, the worm popped back into existence. "I can just enter Sandy's Sand World and hide there while putting an anchor on you, and don't worry, I can still feel and smell stuff while in there!"

"Do I want to know what Sandy's Sand World is?" Jake questioned.

"According to people who claim to know a lot about space stuff, it's apparently what subspace is called or something like that... or was it what I called something called subspace? Either way, it's like space but different. Gotta be there to understand it," Sandy non-explained, yet Jake got the gist of it.

"Well, it works, so go hide in the sand, and let's explore," Jake said as the worm did as he asked, and they left Jake's lodge after Jake engaged his stealth skill. On the way out, he did notice the addition of more magical barriers to keep people out and to stop them from peeping, so that was nice to see. The old sign telling people to keep out also remained.

Walking outside, Jake made his way into the city proper... and was more than pleasantly surprised at how little things had changed. Haven had always been a small quaint place with tree houses, and wooden structures spread relatively sparsely around the foresty city. None of that had changed, and the natural vibe fully remained.

The areas with a few more buildings – such as a small street for shopping – were buzzing with activity as Jake walked through the non-paved roads of Haven. Looking toward some of the larger buildings, Jake saw even more activity in those, especially the building that had served as the home of Miranda for the longest time. It was more of a large office rather than a home, and since Jake's last visit, it had expanded both into the ground and onto nearby trees as a few satellite buildings were constructed.

When it came to the people, all that had really changed were the average levels. People had gotten stronger, especially those who lived in Haven. It had been considered a city for the elites for a long time, and that showed as Jake spotted more than a few C-grades, with most average folk in D-grade. Of course, there were also those weaker, such as the family members of the strong people who settled there or the original residents of Haven. As far as Jake knew, it wasn't as if you got thrown out if you had a low level or anything like that.

Considering so many had left for Nevermore, the number of C-grades was honestly impressive, and based on all the statistics Jake had heard about how strong people from newly initiated planets usually became, Jake got the feeling Earth was well ahead of the curve.

Overall, the vibe of Haven was as great as usual, with there not even being an expanded population, which genuinely did surprise him a bit considering all the people that had come to Earth due to his little Chosen ceremony. There was also the fact that an influx of people would have come once they all learned Jake was the Chosen... but it appeared like Miranda had handled everything incredibly well.

Walking around a bit more in Haven, Jake just took everything in before he decided it was time to check out the other part of what many called Haven but that Jake usually called the Fort. He had definitely expected that to expand quite a bit... but Jake really wasn't prepared for what he saw when he flew up over the treeline and looked in the direction of the Fort, or at least where he assumed what had once been the Fort still was, somewhere in the middle of the massive bloody metropolis that had shot up.

Jake took a moment as he wondered if he had really gone to the right place... but on a closer look, he did spot the dome that was Arnold's workshop. It was a bit off to the side and had a cleared area all around it, but it was still effectively surrounded by buildings and not the small stone buildings Jake had gotten used to.

When he called it a metropolis, he wasn't just talking about size but also representation. High rises that looked straight out of huge cities pre-system shot up by the dozens, making a respectable skyline. Many of them even surpassed the heights possible before the system, with a lot of the architecture physically impossible if not for the system.

Looking below the highrises, Jake saw apartment buildings and well-paved streets everywhere, but there was also stuff like flight lanes. It was far from as advanced as the world Temlat had come from within the Nevermore Challenge Dungeon, but it was clear what had once been the Fort was developing fast into a proper megacity.

Luckily Jake did see that a strip of plains had been designated as a no-build zone between the Fort and Haven itself, keeping the two of them pretty separate. Even so, the city was at a size that went beyond Jake's wildest imagination.

The large plains that had once been there to make the Fort a better defensive position had served as premium space for the real estate market to expand into. Outside of the large city center, suburbs could even be found, and while Jake didn't want to be a peeper, he saw more than his fair share of fully inhabited family homes.

There was still a tent camp, too, but what had once been one of the biggest areas of the Fort was now just a small district at most.

"It's gotten pretty big, huh?" Sandy said, apparently still able to talk to him from within Sandy's Sand World.

Jake just nodded as he kept looking out at the city. How in the actual fuck all this could be built in three years was beyond him. One thing was for sure, he had seriously underestimated the capabilities of builders and architects. He also had to consider that people had come representing major factions, and some of them maybe had some valuable skills to help. Oh yeah, and the high-grade teachers who would be projected even from other universes to help teach the Earthlings.

Glancing around, he spotted more than a few notable buildings, including one he partly recognized, though it was now a few times larger than the last time Jake was there. A massive cathedral had been constructed near the city center, with a large garden in front, taking up quite a lot of space. The entire building looked overly fancy. When he looked a bit closer, he saw it had a total of twelve towers, with each building having a statue at the top. Statues Jake quickly recognized as representations of a certain twelve gods.

That's...

Finally, Jake decided to use a Pulse of Perception to get a proper look at things, focusing specifically on the cathedral. Instantly, he saw why the hell it was so large because even with its massive size, it was filled to the brim. However, he also spotted two things that sent a shiver down his spine.

The first one could be seen when Jake narrowed his eyes and barely looked through one of the windows as he spotted a person on a podium within the cathedral. It was a recognizable figure that instantly gave him flashbacks to the worst parts of the Chosen Ceremony... Felix, the sculptor.

[Human – lvl 286 – Divine Blessing of the Eternal Servant]

Ignoring how the fuck the man leveled so fast, it looked like he had changed career tracks a bit, as he now looked more like a priest or a preacher. However, this part of what he saw wasn't what was truly nightmare-inducing... no, it was what was behind him.

Center-stage in the entire cathedral was a certain statue. One that made Jake seriously consider "accidentally" shooting an arrow at the building. But, he feared that not even he would be able to easily break the monstrosity that was the mythical rarity statue Felix had so proudly presented to Jake. It was the True Vision of the Malefic Viper's Chosen, and for some fucking reason, people were staring at it with reverence.

Yeah, I'm never going to visit that place, Jake swore to himself. The only times he would ever go there was to extract the Vision's Venom, and that was luckily only every ten years.

Shifting his attention elsewhere, Jake took in the many sights of the city. It pretty much had anything one would expect of a metropolis, including some form of floating train. If Jake had to give an estimate, he would definitely put the population in the double-digit millions, if not even more than that. By now, this had to be the largest city on Earth, if not at least very close.

After looking around a bit more, he decided to find someone he could actually talk to who could tell him a bit more about what had been going on over the last few years. Scouting a bit, he found the building that Miranda used to use when managing big-city stuff while at the Fort, though it had now been remodeled into a highrise, so it really wasn't the same building anymore at all.

Anyhow, Jake used his Pulse to search through the building until he found someone near the top within an office larger than the others, so he assumed this person had to be one of the ones in charge. Plus, when he got closer, Jake actually felt a bit surprised as he felt an aura that wasn't even all that weak.

"We should totally prank the guy," Sandy interjected as they were just outside the building.

"Not sure what that would accomplish," Jake muttered. "Outside of making him less willing to talk."

"So pranking time it is!"

#### Chapter 899: The Dark Ones And He Who Knows

Holstred frowned as he read over the report in front of him. They would have to increase security personnel in certain districts if this development continued. Dissidence had been growing over the last few years, ever since he and the other slaves arrived. The natives had mostly been welcoming, but some weren't huge fans, especially of those who weren't humans.

When Ms. Wells was still on Earth, she kept everyone in check, but now that she had gone to Nevermore, a lot of annoying people had come out of the woodwork. Arthur was doing his best, and he had quelled much of the dissatisfaction on a more global scale, but in this city, his influence had little

sway. This was a problem, as this was also the most multi-cultural and multi-racial city on the entire planet, as the majority of those brought to Earth from elsewhere chose to settle down here.

This had led to a lot of crime. Holstred wanted to say that the former slaves were innocent in this entire matter, but there was a lot of tension there, hidden under the surface. A lingering fear of the future and of what it would bring. Many of the freed slaves also weren't sure what to do with themselves after finding themselves on an entirely new planet, making them lash out.

And then there was perhaps the biggest issue... Earth had many factions, some of which had been the ones gifting the slaves to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Seeing a merchant proudly wearing the emblems of the same faction that once slaughtered your family, ruined your home planet, and then enslaved and sold you off could be triggering, to say the least.

All of this is to say that sometimes when one has a melting pot, some of the individual ingredients have a problem properly mixing. Especially given how short a time it had been. After a few decades, Holstred believed many of these cultural issues would naturally fade, but for now, they had to deal with the current situation at hand before it got worse.

While outright murders were rare, they did happen. With the system, everyone now had power, and there was a big disparity between individuals. Those more powerful could easily kill anyone who bothered them with little effort, which could be a recipe for disaster. Most would control themselves, but sometimes emotions got too high, or someone truly vile decided to ignore the laws to take another life.

Holstred was the man Ms. Wells had entrusted to help uphold the law of Haven. A responsibility he had taken on him with pride, and he had more than willingly sworn a Knight's Oath toward the woman, offering his unquestionable loyalty. Despite it effectively making her his master, it was far different than the forced servitude of a slave contract. It was his choice, and should she step onto a path deemed too evil, the oath would cease to be.

He was the former Knight Commander on his own planet before they lost the war and he was enslaved, so he did have some experience in leadership. While he hadn't established any knight order, he had been put in charge of what Ms. Wells called a security force. With her, and many of the other top brass, absent, he had taken on even more work than simply security.

And he personally cared a lot about the security of Haven. His wife and child both lived in the city, and he wanted it to be the safest environment it could possibly be. Compared to many other areas of the

multiverse, it was surely already considered very safe... but Holstred still wasn't satisfied, as he began to consider an action plan to address some of the on-the-surface non-violent organizations against certain races or people that had begun to appear. Many of them were suspected of backing or inciting actual violence behind the scenes, but without proof, moving against them would only lead to more problems...

As Holstred was deep in thought, a magic token vibrated on the table before a voice appeared:

"Sir, he's here again... more insistent than usual..." the voice of the woman on the other end said in an exhausted tone.

Holstred instantly knew who she was talking about as he answered. "Alright, alright, just send him up."

Maybe this would be good for him. A brief respite from actual important matters. Because the man who was about to come was as far from important as he could possibly be.

Less than thirty seconds passed before the door to his office opened, and a man walked in with slightly disheveled hair. Once he saw Holstred, he smiled. "Honored knight! Hard at work, as always! Truly a respectable figure, even if you are surrounded by dark influences, you remain a light within the darkness fighting off evil!"

"Hello Greg, what can I do for you today?" Holstred asked, knowing what was about to come.

"I ask myself what can be done every single day, but before we ask what we can do, we need to understand what needs to be done, and for that to happen, we need to understand our situation and the world at large!" Greg said, more or less going on the same spiel as usual.

Holstred just leaned back as the man took the chance and summoned a whiteboard filled to the brim with... stuff.

"You remember where we left off last time, right?"

"Sure," Holstred just said, honestly not at all remembering the ramblings of the madman.



“Good! I knew you were reasonable... anyway, as I said last, I believe I have finally cracked the code regarding the name Haven and the hidden meanings behind the Dome of Secrets, but that is not what is important right now. No, it’s related to the news of the Chosen of the Dark Ones.”

“To make sure, the Chosen of the Malefic One is still someone who has experienced the integration thousands of times before and is using his knowledge of all his prior lives to excel?” Holstred asked, hiding his amusement as best he could.

“Well, his status as a regressor is unquestionable, and his quest to force through what he considers an ideal future is as clear as day. But, no, this has to do with these so-called Leaderboards... or as they should be rightfully called, the Board of Leaders.”

This could be amusing, Holstred nodded, trying to look serious.

“Think about it. This is their hidden list of members of the Dark Ones. Even the name is a clue... Nevermore. It’s telling them they are to “never more” speak of the Board of Leaders they now belong to. Or are you truly trying to say it’s a coincidence so many influential people are put on the same list like that? Preposterous!” Greg spoke with a level of certainty and confidence in his voice that Holstred could only find admirable.

It was good that Greg was ultimately harmless and more of a fun distraction. Somehow, the man had become convinced Holstred was someone who could be trusted, in part because he was a slave before and secondly because he had been a Knight Commander. Greg somehow had a skill that gave him a general sense as to what kind of Path others walked down, and knowing Holstred was a knight apparently meant he was a man of honor who could be trusted in the fight against the Dark Ones.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

The man continued his lengthy rant about the secret leaders of the multiverse, the former Knight Commander nodding along almost automatically. About half an hour later, Greg’s fervor finally died down as he took a deep breath, which also signified that Holstred should at least listen to his final words.

“So, do you see why we need to be extra cautious of any lines in magic circles longer than three and a half centimeters?” he finished off.

"I do indeed, and I will be on the lookout," Holstred agreed in his usual serious tone.

"It's good to have allies fighting the good fight with me," Greg smiled as he took away the whiteboard. "I shall return and continue my... my..."

Greg stared with wide eyes as he seemed to stare past Holstred. Holstred was confused and looked over his shoulder but saw nothing there. When he turned back to Greg, he saw the man already running towards a window.

"No! You shall never catch me alive!" Greg yelled loudly as he jumped through one of the windows, phasing right through it using magic as he took flight, breaking quite a few air traffic rules in the process.

Holstred stared for a moment before he shook his head. "I hope he gets the help he needs."

Jake stood a bit confused behind the guy in the chair that the man named Greg had referred to as a knight. Sandy had tried to convince him to do some prank that included separating the entire space of the office from the rest of the world, but Jake had decided to just make a sneaky entrance. One where he would appear behind the man, taking him by complete surprise like some ninja in the night.

However, before he could pull that off, Greg entered. Jake wondered what the guy was about and thought it would be fine to surprise two people at once... but once the guy started talking, Jake kind of forgot all about his plans. The words of Greg were just too... interesting.

It was like watching a trainwreck live. The entire thing only got more amusing when Jake fully realized he was the center of this entire conspiracy. Apparently, he had quite a few secret identities, hidden powers, and was a super mastermind villain beyond comprehension by mortal minds. Which made sense, as Jake was actually a god – or at least had been a god at some point – according to Greg's very credible theories.

When the guy finished, Jake was even a bit sad. But... then, out of nowhere, the guy called Greg suddenly looked straight at Jake before screaming and jumping out the damn window before flying away, leaving Jake still standing there invisible as the knight muttered with hopes of Greg improving.

The confusion was very brief, though, as Jake instantly knew who was responsible. “Sandy... what did you do?”

“Wha!? Me! Who says I did anything?” the cosmic worm said in the most guilty tone Jake had ever heard. “Sheesh, what could I even have done? Revealed we were standing here all along and told the guy the Dark Ones are always watching and that the truth is more dangerous than he could possibly imagine? No, I would definitely never do that, ever. But if I did, it would be because a certain someone didn’t want to do a fun prank, so I had to improvise.”

Jake stood there momentarily before sighing and walking around the table toward the door. Jake opened it - his stealth skill, making sure the knight didn’t even notice – and went to the other side before dispelling his stealth skill.

“Killjoy,” Sandy sent, as they realized Jake wasn’t even going to play their original prank anymore.

“Enough pranking for one day; I need this guy to actually give me some useful information and not be scared shitless or view me as some deranged lunatic, making him actually believe the words of that madman,” Jake shot back.

“Jake Thayne, Killer of All Joys.”

Ignoring the cosmic worm, Jake raised his hand and knocked on the door. On the other side, he saw the knight look up with a frown as he spoke up.

“Who goes there?”

Jake could explain himself but decided to just open the door as he walked in. The knight looked at Jake for a second before his eyes opened wide in realization. Scrambling, the man practically jumped over the table and knelt down in front of Jake, his head way too close to the ground.

“This lowly one greets the Chosen of the Malefic One,” he said in a tone that had far more fear than any other emotion in it. This probably shouldn’t have taken him by surprise, but it honestly did.

He knew Miranda had wanted to foster a view of Jake that was less negative than most initially adopted. That he was more of a protector of Earth who didn't get directly involved in matters and wasn't a symbol of fear, but one of stability and multiversal might in that no one would dare attack a planet owned by the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Clearly, that hadn't worked super well. His reputation – or, more accurately, the reputation of the Malefic Viper – was just not that good. At least not good if Jake didn't want to be treated as someone who would kill others just for looking at him wrong.

"No need to kneel," Jake said, trying to sound casual and relaxed. "In fact, you're just making this needlessly uncomfortable for both of us, so please, stand."

Jake saw the man hesitate as the fear of refusing an order from the Chosen seemed to win out over his fear of what would happen if he stopped kneeling. The knight stood up with slow movements, as he still didn't dare look away from the floor.

"What's your name?" Jake tried to get any kind of conversation going.

"I am known as Holstred, honored Chosen."

"Just call me Lord Thayne," Jake shook his head. He wanted to ask the guy to just call him Jake, but that had literally never worked in any situations like this before, so he just defaulted to what he, more often than not, ended up settling on anyway.

"I... very well, Lord Thayne," the guy answered, being quite receptive.

"Thank you," Jake said with a bit of relief that he didn't need a minute-long conversation to convince the guy to not call him some overly long or overly respectful title. "Now, I take it you work for Miranda?"

"That is correct, Lord Thayne. I am one of your former slaves who was employed by Ms. Wells to help with security within the city, with my responsibilities recently expanding due to her temporary absence," Holstred gave a surprisingly detailed answer.

"I see, so I assume you are aware of matters on the planet? I wish to learn the current status of Earth after my return to Earth and how things have developed in my absence," Jake said.

"This... I am aware of current matters, but surely there are those more qualified-"

"No, you'll do," Jake said with a smile as he went around the table and sat behind it. "Now, take a seat and get me up to speed."

Holstred seemed to realize there was no reason to fight it as he nodded. "If that is what Lord Thayne requests, then very well."

The man sat down and, despite his nervousness, began to go over everything that had happened on Earth over the last three years or so, including many things Jake doubted he could have learned from anyone who wasn't a former slave brought to the planet.

About ten minutes in, Sandy got bored as the cosmic worm decided to just take off to who-knows-where, saying they'll be back later. Jake was only a tiny bit worried about what the giant space worm would be up to, but he didn't really want to invest any mental energy in worrying too much as he had a lot of information to take in regarding the political climate of Earth and Haven in particular.

Besides, it was limited how much trouble Sandy could get into within such a short time, right?

Sandy and politics were two things that just didn't mix. The Big Boss Hydra had tried to make Sandy learn about politics, but Sandy didn't care. Neither did Sandy care super much about Earth, though they did want to go back and visit the dunes where they grew up. While Sandy had been effectively disowned for no longer being a Sand Worm, they knew this had mainly happened to give Sandy a good reason to leave and explore the rest of the multiverse with Jake.

And there sure were a lot of things to explore! And eat.

Mainly eat.

One place Sandy had quickly identified was worth exploring was a certain place in the big city. It had taken a while, as the tasties were hidden well... but Sandy had found them. Now, the only problem was just how to sneak into that big metal dome thing without getting discovered, making Jake mad, and potentially getting snack privileges taken away by reporting Sandy to the Big Boss Hydra...

Chapter 900: Science Worm & Rolling With Rick

"You got stuck?" Jake asked.

"I got stuck," Sandy confirmed.

"Really stuck?"

"If I didn't want to break anything and make people mad kind of stuck."

"So really stuck," Jake sighed while staring at Sandy, now back at full size, lying on what looked like a giant mattress. Meanwhile, Arnold was busy operating some control panel as what looked like lasers shot over Sandy's thick skin here and there. Jake felt quite a few more devices at work, too, ninety percent of which he had no idea how even worked.

"In my defense, he cheated," Sandy protected themselves.

"You entered my workshop without permission and triggered the automatic defenses, then proceeded to escape those, forcing me to step in personally," Arnold said, not even looking up from the screen.

"You still cheated."

"I only disrupted your application of personal spacial shrinkage, forcing you to expand within a limited space while jamming that frequency of space magic."

"And how is that not cheating?" Sandy kept complaining, wiggling a bit in annoyance, earning a glance from Arnold before the worm went completely still again so the scientist could continue his measurements. The big worm was practically on a massive scanner due to their crimes against Arnold.

From what Jake gathered, Sandy had smelled delicious stuff in Arnold's workshop, which, fair enough, there definitely was a lot of. Many of the treasures he cultivated also had powerful space mana within, especially the ones involved in projects he had going while in Nevermore. This naturally attracted the senses of a certain worm, who could detect these treasures despite all the defensive measures Arnold had deployed.

If Arnold hadn't been at home, Sandy would likely – no, definitely – have succeeded in wrecking the entire workshop by eating most of the power sources, thus ruining all ongoing projects. However, with Arnold there, he had deployed countermeasures that forced Sandy back to their full size, which was a problem when stuck within a heavily fortified tunnel. Together with a space-magic jammer of sorts, Sandy had been stuck unless the worm released a lot of power to forcibly break free. Sandy totally could have done that and gotten away easily, but they would have broken things for sure in the process.

So, instead of breaking free, Sandy deployed the strategy of negotiation. At least, that's what Sandy said. In reality, Jake highly suspected this entire arrangement was Arnold's idea. Sandy was undoubtedly an interesting creature, and Arnold seemed more than interested in researching the big space worm's abilities.

"Do you feel this?" Arnold asked as Jake felt some odd wave of energy move over Sandy.

"Not really. Like, I felt it kind of, but not very much," the worm responded. "Hey, by the way, how did you even find me? Like... I was super hidden I'm pretty sure, prepared to do a quick hit-and-run. Get in, get out, a quick second or two, but boom, you were there right away."

Arnold didn't even seem to listen to what Sandy said after the worm responded regarding the odd energy, making Jake take over.

"Sandy, he is quite literally blessed by a Void God known as the All-Seeing. I'm pretty sure he's good at spotting people, even if they're super hidden," Jake said with a smirk.

"Bah. Don't tell me he is also one of those weirdoes with a lot of Perception?" Sandy complained.

"Pretty sure he is," Jake smiled.

"I am," Arnold confirmed. "Now, tell me what kind of response this invokes."

A blast of energy struck Sandy in the side but seemed to disperse all throughout their skin, as if the impact was spread out evenly, resulting in no real effect. Jake watched on with interest as Arnold nodded while Sandy answered.

"Nah, that didn't hurt me either," Sandy said in a happy tone.

"I see, I see," Arnold said as he pressed a button. When he did, Jake saw a drone fly into the room, carrying what looked like a large slab of metal. Sandy gleefully opened their mouth, sucking it in, drone and everything.

"Yummy!" the worm said happily. "More of that later!"

Jake threw Arnold a glance as the man explained. "A piece of metal extracted from deep beneath the ground in a C-grade territory. So far, it has little purpose except its energy-richness and ability to handle certain affinities well. I fused a large amount of it into the slab and found no further use of it anymore."

"I thought Sandy was doing this as an apology?"

"Bit of both!" Sandy said. "It's only fair if I have to sit here for a while that I'm at least fed in the meantime!"

"I see," Jake nodded before asking Arnold. "What are you using Sandy to research anyway?"

"Sub-space travel."

"Sandy's Sand World travel," the giant worm corrected.

Ignoring the worm, Jake continued asking. "What even is this sub-space thing? Some other dimension or layer of space?"



Jake considered how his own stealth skill worked and how that made him shift on the spectrum of Perception. This wasn't really the same, but Jake did know there were degrees to space and how stable or unstable it could be, as well as the presence of spatial layers.

"Rather than call it a different dimension or space, it's more accurate to say it interacts with another layer beneath stable space, contrary to all other spatial layers that are stacked on top of stable space. It changes the fundamental rules dictating the laws of time, distance, and speed by modifying them with a new conceptual factor that I call the sub-space affinity," Arnold explained. "This affinity is heavily connected to, but not to be confused with the regular space affinity. It's instead something relatively unique I've found only some creatures or objects possess. It appears to have little to no active combat applications but is suited solely for travel over long distances without relying on teleportation."

"Isn't teleportation traveling through this sub-space?" Jake wondered.

"No," Arnold shook his head. "Teleportation is far more simplistic. It's merely shifting an entity's coordinates in space to an already-known location. To teleport, one must know where they're going, or at the very least have a strong general idea, for example, to teleport a set distance in a direction. Sub-space travel is far different, and also a lot more sustainable for long-distance travel. It's also a requirement for exploration of unknown space, as teleporting there simply carries too much risk."

Jake listened and nodded as he had another thought... did his Wings of the Malefic Viper escape skill make him enter this sub-space thing? It stripped away nearly all other concepts by corroding them, including space, so if it melted all layers away, maybe it left only this sub-space? At least it was possible that was how it worked. Definitely something to experiment with.

"So, how long do you think this research project will take?" Jake asked as he saw Arnold walk over with what looked like an overly large camera as he took a few pictures of Sandy.

This tale has been pilfered from Royal Road. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

"I do not know; there is simply too much to explore," the scientist said. "Before this, I used spacecrafts with special material and magic circles, allowing it to enter subspace through the consumption of vast amounts of energy, but this... this Cosmic Genesis Worm is like a being born to live within sub-space. It's simply awe-inspiring that such a creature can exist."

“Well, Sandy belonging in Sandy’s Sand World only makes sense, duh,” the worm said smugly. “And I am awe-inspiring, aren’t I?”

“Sure you are,” Jake shook his head. “Anyway, are you fine with staying here for a while, Sandy?”

“That depends...”

“Throughout the last three years of Nevermore, vast amounts of resources have been collected,” Arnold added.

“You heard the man! Why would I leave a nice buffet and a comfy bed?”

Jake just smiled and, after talking with the two of them a bit more, left the workshop for Arnold to continue to use Sandy for his experiments while Sandy happily lived the life of a living trash container for all the valuable material Arnold had stocked up but no longer needed. He did wonder why the dietitian hadn’t been spat out, but oh well, he wasn’t going to babysit a giant space worm and their eating habits.

He decided to take a bit of a trip around the city of Haven. Yes, it was a bit confusing that the metropolis once known as the Fort and the nice forest town were both called Haven, but what could Jake do about it. It wasn’t like changing the name was easy either, as the system interface for cities called it all Haven.

Going back slightly, his talk with Holstred had been very enlightening, even if it had been cut a bit short, as he got a message from Arnold that he had caught Sandy, and Sandy tried to play it off by saying Jake had told the damn worm to break in.

Either way, he and Holstred went over the most important parts. Earth was facing problems for sure, and the integration of the freed slaves would take some time, but honestly... things were way fucker better than he had feared.

Jake had half-expected to hear about some civil war having taken place or at least a purge of some kind. However, things had been pretty damn peaceful, even if there were still issues. It was clear Miranda had done a banger job, and done much to help integrate the former slaves to make them feel part of Earth.

That's also why Jake decided not to get involved in any of it.

Could he perhaps stand up and make some grand declaration telling everyone to play nice? Maybe, but he wasn't sure it would lead to genuine change. Jake also had to recognize that he was an idiot when it came to things like this. No, it was definitely better to not make any rash decisions but, at the very least, wait for Miranda to return. If she told him to do something, he would more than gladly step up and help, but doing so behind her back could easily fuck up things far more than it would help.

Walking around the city with his stealth skill active a bit longer, Jake kept being impressed by how much things had developed. It was all incredibly similar to a pre-system city, but the touch of magic could also be seen everywhere. People bought stuff and instantly put it in their spatial bags or other such items. There were flight lanes above the usual streets, and the stores made ample use of different forms of magic to better show off products while defending their valuable stuff with barriers.

It's hard to imagine this was empty plains overrun by angry cows just a few years ago, Jake sighed to himself. The world was still changing at a rapid pace, no doubt about it.

Leaving the city, Jake returned to the "real" Haven. With Sandy preoccupied, Jake had a certain place he wanted to visit before he would take a bit of a solo journey.

Walking through a rocky tunnel, he felt the dense life mana from the cavern below. The walls were lined with shining moss and a few mushrooms here and there, all of them of high quality. He even spotted a few rare mushrooms.

Continuing, he soon reached his destination. A multi-colored cavern, filled with plants and life, appeared before him, with a hole in the middle of it all. In the hole, one could find a metal disc leading to the dungeon known as the Undergrowth.

Few creatures lived in the cavern... but Jake instantly spotted a slightly familiar-looking figure. He said slightly familiar... because while he recognized the patterns on its skin, the troll certainly hadn't been that big the last time he saw it.

[Undergrowth Cave Troll – lvl 112]

The troll that was still smaller than the troll in the dungeon had been was busy weeding as far as Jake could see. It hadn't noticed Jake, as he still had his stealth skill active, allowing him to silently just admire its work. Going a bit deeper into the cavern he soon saw the one he had been looking for: Rick.

Jake instantly knew he had evolved, even if his size hadn't changed in the slightest. His entire body had turned a slightly green color, with moss growing all over his back, something that didn't seem to bother him at all.

Currently, Rick was busy tending to a large blue plant that towered above any of the others. It looked a bit like a tulip, and Jake could feel it was a valuable herb. Using Identity, he did confirm it was an ancient rarity natural treasure, and definitely one Rick had spent a lot of time cultivating.

Something Rick's new race had definitely helped with.

[Troll Grove Keeper – lvl 227]

Jake decided to no longer sneak around as he revealed himself not far from Rick. The troll instantly noticed his presence and turned around as he smiled and waved.

"Hey Rick," Jake said, smiling back. "It's been a while, huh? How are things going?"

Rick gave Jake a thumbs up as he spread his arms to show off the cavern. Jake nodded, agreeing that it had become impressive. The cavern had even been expanded a bit, likely by the trolls themselves, to make more space for all their plants and flowers.

"Seems like things are indeed going well," Jake nodded proudly. He didn't get further as he heard the thundering steps of running trolls from behind him. Jake had, of course, already seen them coming and turned around with a smile to see two large Undergrowth Cave Trolls tower over him.

"You're all grown up," Jake said to two of them as one of them started clapping while the other reached out to poke him.

Rick roared lowly, stopping the troll from poking while looking a bit embarrassed. The troll in question then looked around before plucking a big flower and offering it to Jake, who gladly accepted the apology. Seeing the three trolls really brought a strong sense of nostalgia, as he definitely didn't regret getting them out of the dungeon.

Jake decided to stay with the trolls a bit as he allowed Rick to show him around the large garden. While none of the trolls spoke, they did make sounds, and especially Rick was clearly intelligent. As for why they didn't speak, Jake had no idea. Maybe they just didn't ever have anyone to talk to and didn't need to learn?

While being shown around, Rick also made it clear he and his two kids sometimes went deeper into the ground through the tunnels. Using a Pulse, Jake saw a network of tunnels expand downwards near-endlessly, much akin to the termite hive Jake had explored, except this expansion was entirely natural.

From the sounds of it and the shiny rocks Rick showed off, it became clear the three trolls pretty often delved deep to obtain natural resources and fight. Even if they were all working as troll gardeners, they were still combat-focused creatures who needed a bit of club-swinging once in a while.

After he and the trolls had chilled for a bit, Jake finally got down to business. "Hey, Rick, can you help me with a little something? I got some manure for the banana musa above, and I'm confident you would be better at using it than me."

Rick didn't even need to think as he nodded, and together, the two of them headed up to his lodge. When they got there, Rick instantly inspected the bags and the musa, with it pretty fast becoming clear to Jake this wasn't the troll's first time seeing the banana plant. He had probably been the one to take care of it during all the time Jake wasn't there.

Jake also noticed how, despite Rick's large size, he never left any footprints when he walked. He didn't float above the ground either; it was more like the grass he stood on was somehow able to hold all his weight. Not to say he was light... he just definitely had some skill to not trample down any plants he stood on.

With interest, Jake watched Rick at work as the troll unpacked the bags and began to mix the manure with the soil around the musa while infusing it with energy. He even saw the troll make a sound before Rick spat a pretty damn big blob of spit on the mixture that instantly seeped into it.

Don't question, just trust the professional, Jake told himself as he kept watching.

It didn't take more than half an hour for Rick to finish, making sure to use all the manure – something Sandy would definitely be disappointed with. Once everything was done, Jake could practically feel the banana musa suck in energy from the soil all around it. One had to remember that the original soil it grew in had been brought there by Jake when he stole the banana plant from that ancient temple thing from the time monkey way back in the day.

"Thanks for your hard work," Jake said, Rick just waving him off as he gave a double thumbs up.

"Will you help keep watch over it and make sure everything goes as it should?"

Rick naturally nodded in reassurance, making Jake feel pretty good about what the banana musa could grow into. Right now, it was an ancient rarity musa, but if he could get it to legendary rarity, that would be pretty cool.

"It's been fun hanging out, but I think I'll have to head off now," Jake said. Rick didn't seem disappointed but just nodded as he reached out a hand. Jake took it as they briefly shook hands. Still smiling, said his goodbyes as he headed off, while Rick also went back to his grove cavern.

It was good seeing the trolls, for sure, and it had been a fun reunion. Now, he planned on heading toward Skyggen to at least hang out there for a while until Sandy was done getting experimented on by Arnold. On the way, he did plan on having one more reunion...

Though he doubted the frost wyvern would be as happy to see him as the trolls had.